

# Bangladesh at a Glance









# BANGLADESH AT A GLANCE

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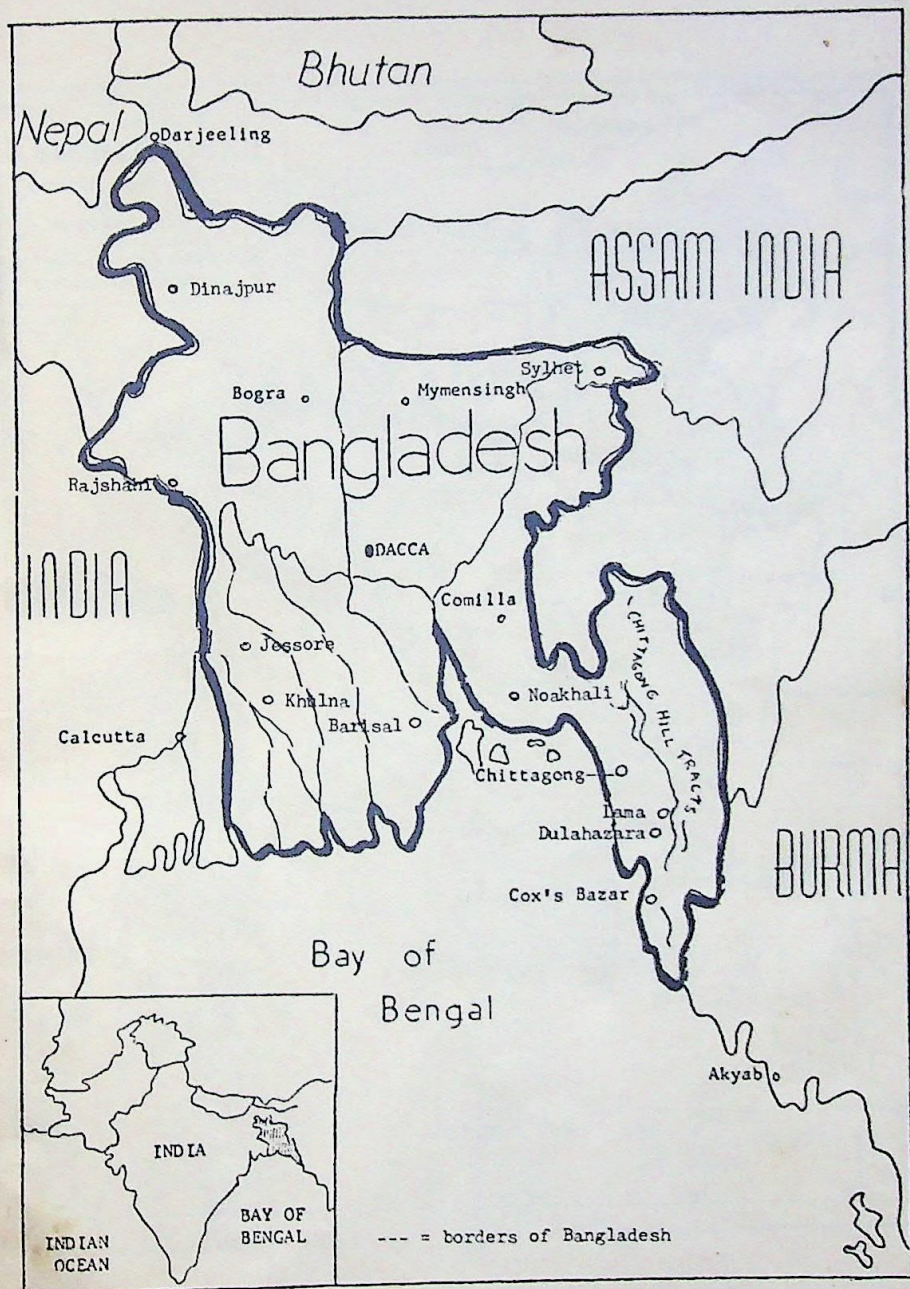
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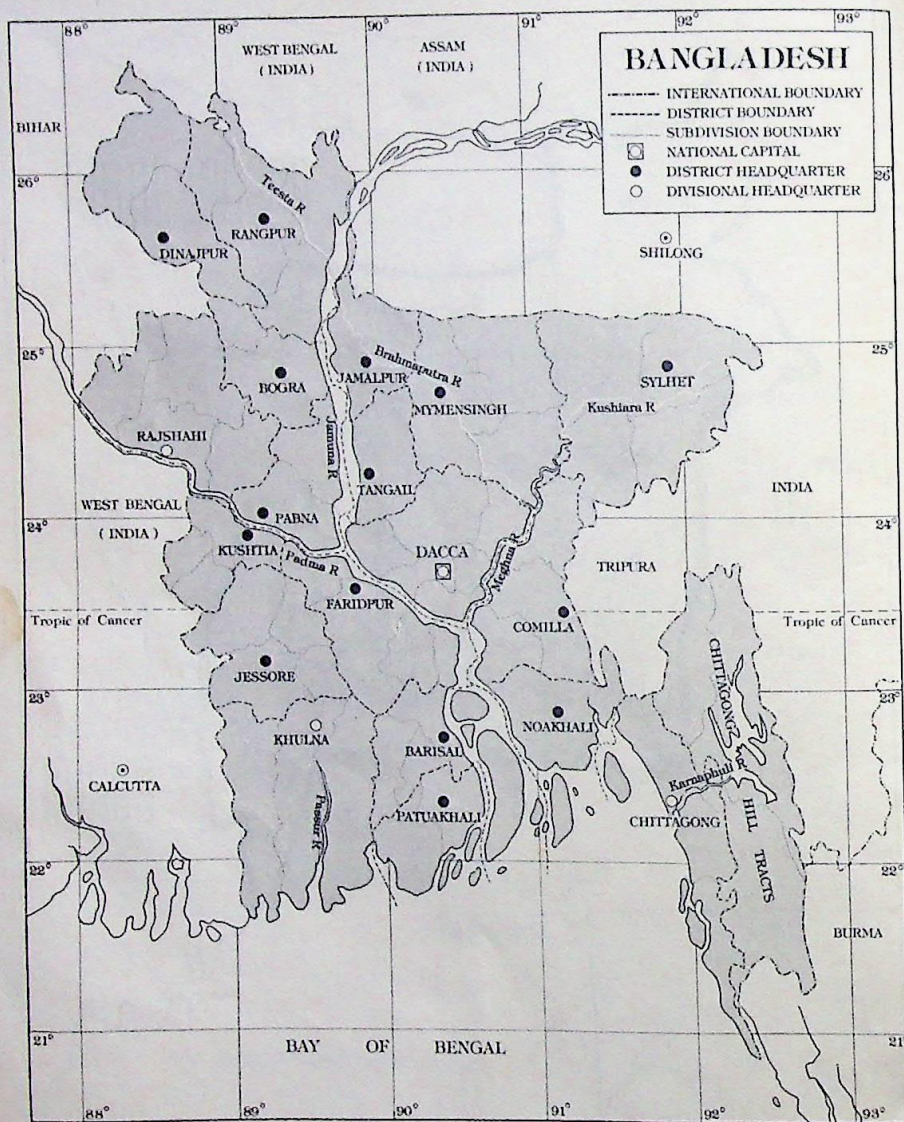
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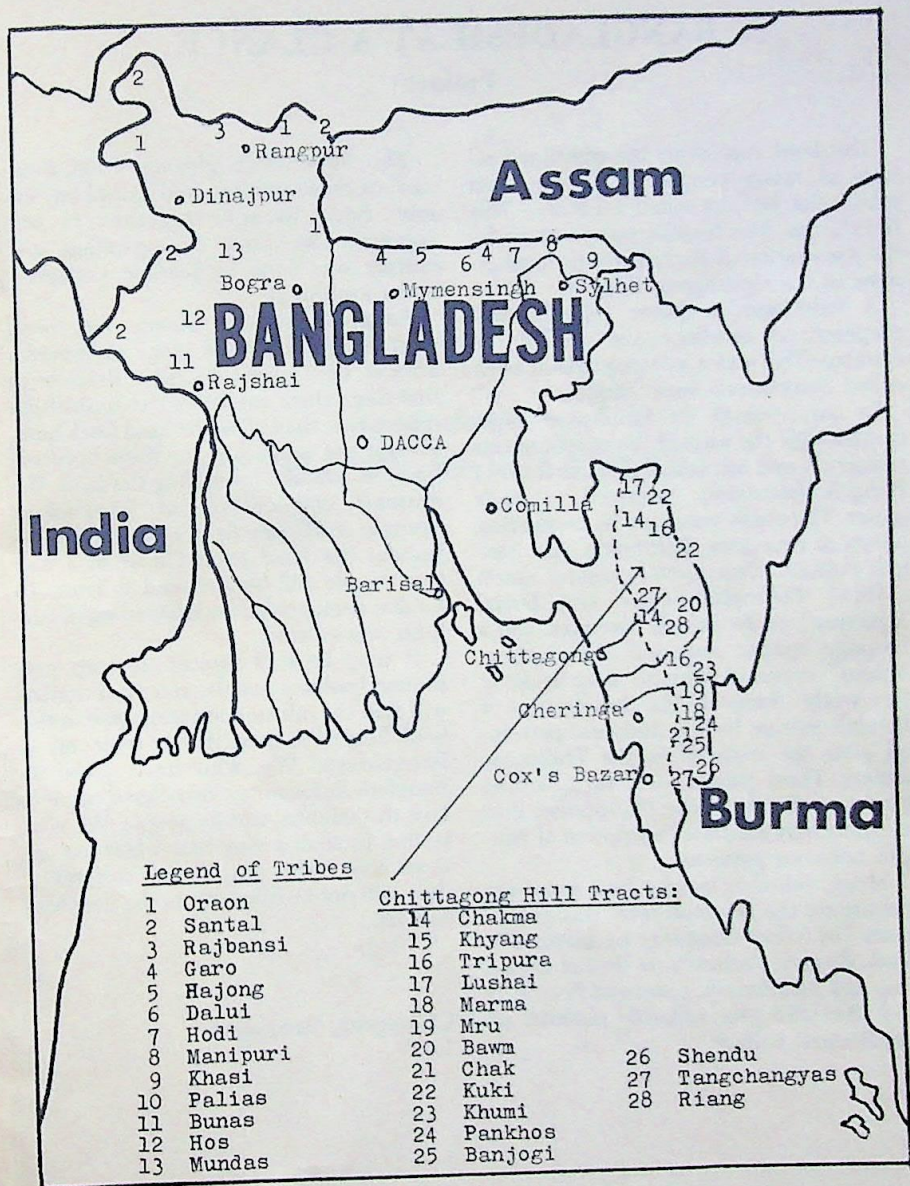












# BANGLADESH AT A GLANCE

## Preface

This book represents the combined efforts of many people. It began as an orientation booklet called T.I.P.'s — *This Is Pakistan*. The booklet was prepared by the Association of Baptists for its missionaries in the Chittagong District.

A little later, in Dacca, Julie Parshall prepared an excellent overview of the country. This was a mimeographed book called *Bangladesh-Amar Desh*.

In an attempt to familiarize newcomers with the ways of the people of this country, Lynn Silvernale and her team of Bengali translators prepared a study paper. The study was done by comparing points of American, Philippine, and Bengali culture. Two mimeographed sheets entitled "Philippine Values" and "Social Structure" by Donald E. Douglas, and a 14-page paper entitled "Philippine Values" provided valuable help in doing this study. Some of the descriptions of Bengali culture in this study are patterned after the material in the Philippine papers. These papers, used for orienting foreigners to life in the Philippines, give an amazingly accurate description of Bengali behavior patterns.

Much valuable insight into American culture on the informal level was gained from *The Silent Language* by Edward T. Hall. *Bengali Peasant Life* by Lal Behari Day and *Bangladesh, Land and People* by C.S. Rahman give valuable material on the Bengali culture.

The information gleaned from these various books, papers, and pamphlets has now been brought together in one volume. The work of compiling and editing was done by Jeannie Lockerbie and Carol Stagg.

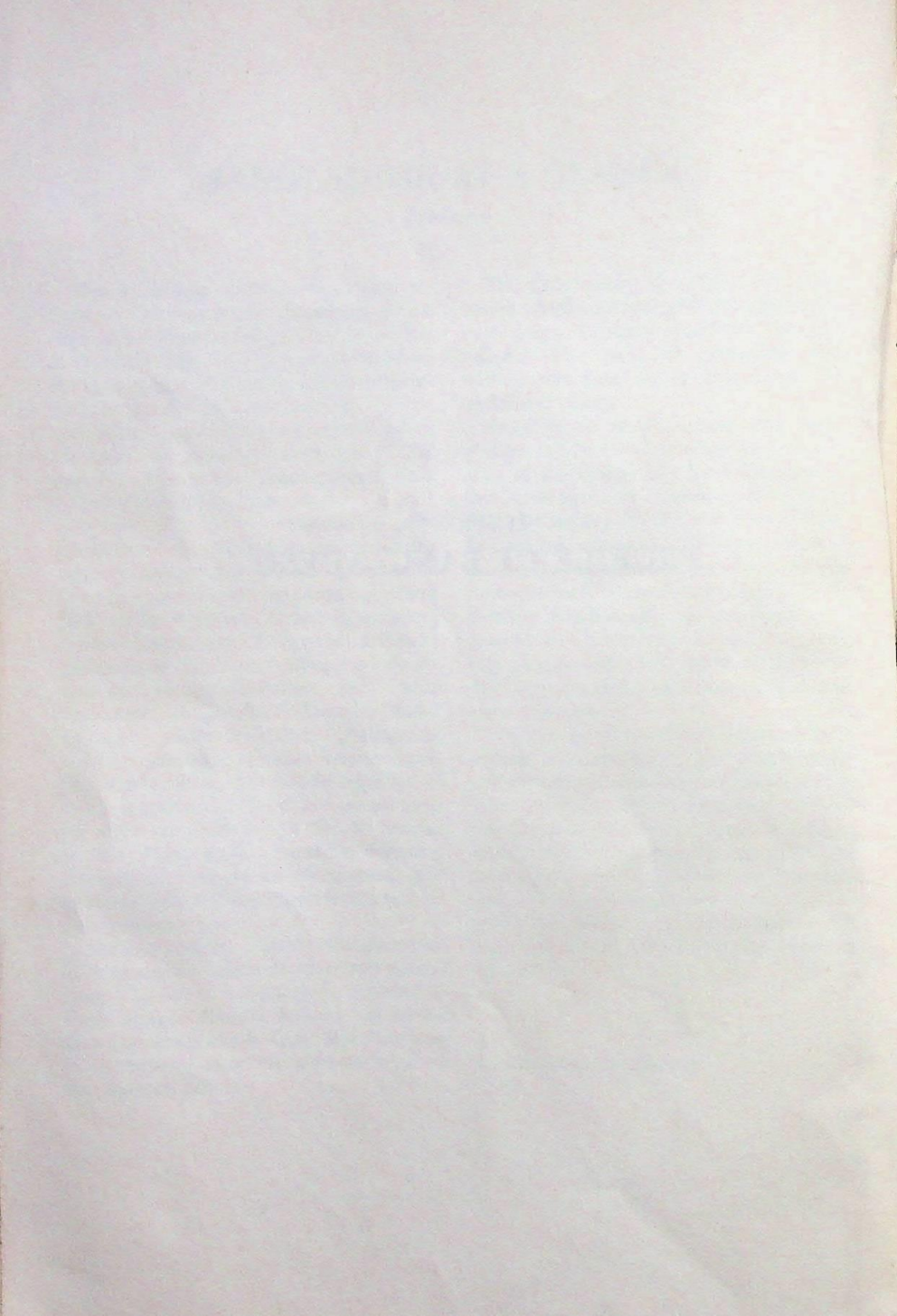
*Bangladesh at a Glance* has been written for those who come as missionaries of the Gospel of Christ. Because of that slant, there are references to spiritual concepts as they affect life and work here. We do not apologize for these spiritual tones in a book introducing the land, the customs and culture of Bangladesh because unashamedly we are seeking to present the Lord Jesus Christ in a way that people will be attracted to Him. To do that demands an understanding of customs and culture.

It may be that diplomatic corp personnel, business people, and even tourists will find the information contained in this book helpful to them during their stay in Bangladesh. We who have lived in Bangladesh for many years have come to love this country and its people. We wish to live in such a way that while our actions and words may seem "different," they will not be offensive to the people of this land.

Chittagong, Bangladesh  
1980



SECTION I  
**PROFILE OF BANGLADESH**





## CHAPTER 1 GENERAL PROFILE

### *Origin*

Bangladesh: the name means "land of the Bengalis." The beginnings of this race date back into antiquity. Of the multiplicity of aboriginal races in Hindustan, only eight were distinguished by their degree of superiority in civilization, the arts, language, literature, and the extensive territory they cover. The Bengalis were one of these. But beyond the original mixture of Mongoloid and Aryan blood, a crowd of foreign nations came in to conquer or to intermingle: Tartars, Turks, Armenians, Portuguese, Dutch, French, English, and others.

### *History and Government*

British rule over the vast Indian subcontinent, dating from the 18th Century, ended in August, 1947, when India and Pakistan became independent nations. Pakistan's government power was centered in West Pakistan. Despite the fact that East Pakistan had a larger population and was the chief foreign exchange earner, she was subjected to ill treatment by West Pakistan. Economic exploitation, cultural subjugation, political treachery, and, finally in March, 1971, the unleashing of the reign of terror by the Pakistan Military Junta, forced the Bengalis to rise in an unprecedented rebellion.

Months of fighting followed during which it was estimated that more than one million died and 10 million Bengalis fled to India. Following guerrilla attacks and border skirmishes, India and Pakistan declared war on December 3, 1971. On December 16, Bangladesh was formally declared an independent nation, following surrender by the Pakistan army.

Sheik Mujibur Rahman, Awami League leader who had been captured in March, 1971, was freed by Pakistan and became Bangladesh's first Prime Minister. He adopted a parliamentary system of government and installed a new cabinet. Mujib announced the nationalization of domestic banks, insurance companies, and jute, textile, and sugar mills.

He promised his people that within three years his *Sonar Bangla* (Golden Bengal) would be self-sufficient in food.

But six months later little headway had been made and discontent was widespread among the people. Mujib was criticized for failure in the distribution of food grains and other essential consumer goods, resulting in skyrocketing prices and runaway inflation.

The country's early days were marked by coups, counter-coups, martial law, the quick rise and fall of political leaders, unrest, and a general feeling of discontent over the independence the people had fought so dearly to obtain.

The government has high hopes of raising the economic level and improving the lot of the people. Under a series of five-year plans, problems such as drought and flooding, population control, eradication of adult illiteracy, etc. are being tackled. Described as a "peaceful revolution," these programs hope to change the quality of life for the millions of Bangladesh.

The People's Republic of Bangladesh is governed under the provisions of a written constitution which is based on four state principles:

1. absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah
2. nationalism
3. democracy
4. socialism, meaning economic and social justice.

The constitution guarantees fundamental rights to the citizens including equality before the law, equality of sexes, prohibition of forced labor, freedom of assembly and association, freedom of religion, freedom of thought, conscience, and speech, and the rights to property.

All legislative powers of the Republic are vested in the 330-member National Assembly. Three hundred of the seats are directly elected on the basis of adult franchise. The remaining 30 seats, reserved for women, are filled by votes of the elected members. Voting rights begin at the age of 18.

The President is the chief executive of



the Republic. He is elected directly by the people on the basis of universal adult franchise for a term of five years. He may be removed from office by a vote of no-confidence obtained through a nationwide referendum. He appoints the Vice-President, the Prime Minister, other cabinet members, the Chief Justice, and other judges of the Supreme Court.

The highest court of law is the Supreme Court, comprised of the High Court and the Appellate Division. The High Court upholds the rights guaranteed under the constitution while the Appellate Division can appeal cases where there is a question as to the interpretation of the law.

### Geography

Bangladesh is a delta region of 55,598 square miles formed by the rivers Ganges and Brahmaputra. It lies between 21°30' and 27° north latitude and 88°01' and 92°52' east latitude. It is bounded by India on three sides: east, north, and west. There is also a small boundary with Burma in the southeast. The greatest point of distance between north and south is 464 miles, while the farthest point between east and west is 288 miles. There are 430 miles of coastline along the Bay of Bengal.

The land is largely flat and fertile, serviced by five river systems and 5,000 miles of waterways. There are 6,880 miles of paved road and 1,800 miles of rail tracks.

Arching around the flat plains are the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains which are inhabited by the tribal people. Bangladesh is divided into 19 administrative districts. (See map, page iii, for names and location of these districts.)

### Population

There is one impression that overwhelms the newcomer to Bangladesh — PEOPLE: masses of humanity, a sea of faces always surrounding you wherever you are. Over 90 million people by the latest count (with this figure expected to double by the turn of the century) make Bangladesh the most densely populated rural nation in the world.

There are two main groups of people in Bangladesh. The *Bengalis* are the most numerous. They are the age-old, brown-

skinned inhabitants of this land. Most of them live in the broad plains areas of Bangladesh. The other group consists of *tribal people* who live in the areas where jungle-covered hills exist. They are Oriental-featured people whose ancestors came from Burma, Thailand, Assam, or elsewhere in Southeast Asia. There are a number of different tribes, each having its own language and customs. (See map, page iv, for the exact location of the 28 known tribes in Bangladesh.)

### Mode of Life

Eighty per cent of the people live in rural areas, although more and more are migrating to the 60,000 cities or villages in search of work. Twenty-six million acres are under cultivation, 22 million of this in rice, which is still short of the requirement to feed the inhabitants. The remaining acres are planted in jute, tea, and cotton. The country's economy is tied up with the production and marketing of these items.

In the villages, life is very simple. Virtually no changes have been made in general living conditions or methods of farming since before the time of Christ. In the Hill Tracts, unbelievably primitive conditions exist. Some of the people wear the scantiest of clothing, and many have never seen a train, automobile or electric light.

### Beggars

"The poor are always with us" is not just a catchy phrase in Bangladesh. No doubt you discovered this within the first few minutes after leaving Dacca airport! Many beggars are truly in want and beg because they are really hungry. Some are professionals and probably receive more help than the ones who really need it.

The Muslim gives alms for merit and most beggars believe that they are helping you on your way to Heaven by allowing you to give to them. Sometimes it helps to say, "moph koro" (forgive me). This means you are asking his forgiveness because you are unable to give. Upon hearing "moph koro," most beggars will leave unless they are very persistent. It doesn't help to "make a scene" and try to drive the beggar away. Here are some suggestions which we have found helpful:



1. *Most of us avoid giving money to beggars who come to our homes.* Beggars who come to the home and receive money will return, frequently with hordes of their fellows. This is not desirable, especially if there are children playing outside. Between trying to dismiss the beggars (politely or otherwise) and control the children who may be frightened or may be rudely mocking the beggars, it becomes a distasteful situation. One way to handle this is to call the children inside and send a household servant out with a small amount of rice for each person.
2. *Most give only to those who are deformed or otherwise obviously unable to work.* It is a well-known fact that hundreds of people who beg do so because they prefer begging to work. Many children are sent to beg by working fathers to augment the family income. These people do not really need help.
3. *Most of us prefer to give on the way out of the bazaar.* Giving to beggars upon arrival at the bazaar tends to draw a sizeable following which can be awkward as you attempt to progress through the bazaar. If you wait until your errands are finished, and give on the way out, it saves needless irritation.
4. *A "baksheesh pocket" may be helpful.* A "baksheesh pocket" containing coins in the amount you want to give to the beggars helps make your giving quick and inconspicuous.

### ***Education***

20% of the population can pass a simple literacy test, though at present 32% of all children six years of age and over are enrolled in some type of school. The literacy rate for Christians is above 80% due to the emphasis placed on education by foreign missions. There are 31,700 elementary and high schools in Bangladesh. An additional 170 colleges and technical schools are scattered throughout the country. The major cities now boast universities and medical colleges.

### ***Language***

Bengali is the official language although English is spoken among the educated. The Bengali language has a long and very rich literary tradition with a magnificently broad and expressive vocabulary. It is the language of the Nobel prize-winning poet, Rabindranath Tagore.

Bengali is a phonetic language and when you have learned the approximately 50 characters and some combined letters, you will be able to read almost anything. Each district seems to have its own unwritten dialect, which causes great hardship to the foreigner who thought he had mastered Bengali when he passed his exams! Various tribal languages are also common in their own sections.

### ***Health***

The life expectancy of the Bangladeshi is 47 years. There is only one doctor for every 8,500 people, a factor influential in the high infant mortality rate of 135 per 1,000 live births. The average per capita caloric intake is less than 2,000 calories per day.

### ***Time***

Bangladesh Standard Time (BST) is six hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). It is one-half hour ahead of Indian Standard Time and one hour behind Thailand Standard Time.

### ***Money***

The unit of currency is the *Taka*. It is made up of 100 paisa, and coins are in denominations of 1, 2, 5, 10, 25, and 50 paisa. You may sometimes hear the word "anna" used. This is the old form of currency. (16 annas made one taka.) Hence, 1 anna means 6 paisa; 4 annas is 25 paisa; 8 annas is 50 paisa. Exchange rates are subject to frequent fluctuation. Your bank can inform you of current rates.

### ***Government Office Hours***

Government offices usually are open from 10:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. Monday to Thursday, and from 10:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. on Friday with a break from 1:00 to 2:00 P.M. for performing Muslim prayers. Saturday hours are 10:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M. During the month of Ramzan.



offices open about 8:30 A.M. and close around 2:00 P.M.

### **Banks**

Banking hours are 9:30 A.M. to 1:30 P.M. from Monday to Thursday and 9:00 to 11:00 A.M. on Fridays and Saturdays. During Ramzan, banks and commercial businesses close earlier than usual.

Foreign banks are:

Dacca:

Grindlays Bank . . . . (Phone 246812-14)

Chartered Bank . . . . . (Phone 254174)

American Express . . . . (Phone 283173)

Chittagong:

Grindlays Bank . . . . . (500679)

Chartered Bank . . . . . (201261)

American Express . . . (501045 / 501046)

### **Postal Services and Telephones**

Internal postal services are generally reliable provided mail is posted at a main post office. There have been some difficulties with foreign mails, although aero-

grammes appear to receive quick and safe delivery.

In Dacca, overseas telegrams can be lodged at the General Post Office, the main telegraph office, or at the post office in the Hotel Intercontinental, and should preferably be sent "Express." In Chittagong, telegrams can be sent from the central telegraph office. Lengthy delays may be expected when making trunk and international telephone calls.

Advise friends sending parcels to declare wholesale value on contents and to allow up to five months for arrival in Bangladesh. Also, parcels sent within or out of the country should be registered. Do not send cash through the post office; use money order or check.

### **Electricity**

The electric supply, 220V/50 cycles, is given to substantial fluctuations, and occasional damage to electrical equipment has occurred if the equipment is left switched on during a power failure or power fluctuation.



## CHAPTER 2

### CLIMATE AND SEASONS

#### *Climate*

Bangladesh is generally said to have a typical tropical monsoon climate. There is a wide variation in temperatures. In the winter months (November to February) temperatures can fall to 39° F. (4° C.). In the summer months, particularly in April, May, and September, temperatures may reach 105° F. (40° C.). Most of the year, the relative humidity is high — 80 to 95%.

#### *Cyclones*

Over the last 180 years there were no less than 200 cyclones, 48 of them severe. The six major ones claimed one-half million lives. Total casualties were between five and six million people along with an uncountable number of cattle and goats.

#### *Floods*

Bangladesh is in the combined delta of mighty rivers with hundreds of arteries. The rivers cannot be controlled nor can the weather be predicted. Every year about one-third of the cultivated area experiences floods during the six months, May to October. Every four or five years the floods are major.

#### *Seasons and Months*

Bangladesh is a sub-tropical country with subtle, but distinct, changes in seasons. Each season has individual beauty and refreshing changes in weather. The six recognized seasons are listed and described below:

*Greesho (Summer)* mid-April to mid-June — This is one of the difficult seasons in Bangladesh. Temperatures and humidity are rising (80-100°) and both days and nights are hot and sultry. Often the days are windy, hot and dusty; by evening dark clouds form in the northwest and wind, hail, or electrical storms occur. As the monsoon rains draw nearer, these storms are less regular and less severe. After one of these storms the air is refreshingly cool and comfortable, at night at least, but the heat quickly returns

when the sun shines again. The beautiful Krishna Chura tree is in full bloom during this season, its orange-red blossoms making the heat and humidity worthwhile. The blazing sun has dried up most vegetables by this time. Green mangoes which fall from the trees during the storms can be used to make sauce (much like applesauce), chutneys, pies, etc. Bananas and pumpkins are especially good. Vegetables and fruits in season: pumpkin, sweet potato, cucumber, eggplant, cold storage potatoes and carrots, beans, watermelon, lichee, green mango, guava, and banana.

*Borsho (Rainy or Monsoon Season)* mid-June to mid-August — In spite of the ideas that most people have of monsoon, it can be quite refreshing after the hot, dusty months just past. The onset can be rather monotonous with continuous rain for more than 24 hours, but usually a pattern sets in with cooling rains interspersed with sunshine. The countryside becomes a rich carpet of green rice, and the sky is picturesque with rain clouds. Mildew and insects are a problem, so your household helpers need to clean books and stored items regularly. Soiled clothing, table linens, and bath linens smell sour and mildew almost overnight. Bangladesh is known for its mangoes, the sweetest and largest in the world. These, along with pineapples, are readily available and delicious now. Tropical flowers and plants flourish. Vegetables and fruits in season: cold storage potatoes and carrots, eggplant, okra, chichinga, pineapple, mango, banana, and guava.

*Shawrawt (Autumn)* mid-August to mid-October — This is the second of the two unpleasant seasons in Bangladesh. The rains are ending, but the temperature and humidity are still high. Everyone is weary of dampness and mold; it is a very good time for holidays. However, this season, too, has its special beauty. The sky becomes a beautiful, clear, clean blue. The sunrises and sunsets can be spectacular! Food is definitely a problem these days, so you will need to rely on



things you have canned or frozen. But it is time to start thinking of and preparing for a garden.

*Hemonto (Dewy Season)* mid-October to mid-December — We endure the rest of the year for this delightfully refreshing season. The air becomes dry and cool, flower and vegetable gardens are growing, and the sky is crystal-clear blue. Many of the trees shed their leaves. The days are shorter, and in the evening a dew settles in and deepens into fog during the night and early morning hours. Usually a light wrap is needed outdoors in the evenings, and a blanket feels good on the bed. Many of the worst cyclones off the Bay of Bengal have occurred during this season. Vegetables and fruits in season: cauliflower, spring onions, eggplant, cabbage, new potatoes, lao (a type of squash), oranges, apples (imported), winter pineapples, and papaya.

*Sheet (Winter)* mid-December to mid-February — This is another period of most pleasant weather. Daytime temperatures range between 70° and 75° F. and the night temperatures dip into the 40's. It isn't uncommon to have a few days of winter rain in January; however, most days can be counted on to be dry and pleasant enough for a picnic. And the Bangladeshis do just that — this is the

season for weekend picnics! They go by the busloads to open areas for a day of fun. Long sleeves or even a wrap feel good indoors during the day and, definitely, blankets are needed at night. Flower and vegetable gardens are flourishing and it is time to can (or bottle) foods to be used later in the year. Vegetables and fruits in season: beans, cauliflower, peas, lettuce, tomatoes, cucumber, turnips, carrots, potatoes, new onions, cabbage, beets, oranges, apples, and guava. Flowers that we know in the Western Hemisphere grow during this season.

*Bawshawnto (Spring)* mid-February to mid-April — This season is characterized by warm, dry days and cool nights. Often there is a very warm, dusty wind which makes it difficult to keep the house clean. Since the humidity is a bit lower, one can hardly believe the temperature is as high as it is. It is time to put away the blankets and sweaters until next cool season. The winter vegetables and flowers will soon succumb to the heat. By the end of March, sudden and violent storms out of the northwest begin to occur. Vegetables and fruits in season: tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, beets, cauliflower, cucumber, cabbage, peas, green beans, bananas, and apples (imported). It is time to can or bottle tomatoes and to make pickles.



## CHAPTER 3

### PLACES OF INTEREST IN BANGLADESH

#### *Dacca*

The Tourist Bureau, in the Hotel Intercontinental, has tours of the city that are very interesting and not too expensive. They also have tours to Tongi, Madhupur, Savar and other places of interest along with a river boat tour. As these are often changing, it is best to check as to what is available.

#### *Dacca Zoo*

Located about five miles north of Dacca, the zoo is a very good place to take children. There are many large, open areas for children to run and play and picnic areas (only don't look for picnic tables!), along with the animals themselves. The area is kept in a clean and neat condition and there is a fair selection of animals to see. For enough "baksheesh" you may even talk the elephants into taking you for a ride. There are always peanuts for sale to feed the monkeys and deer which are quite tame and will eat right out of your hand.

#### *Suhrawardy Uddyan (Race Course)*

Near Dacca's Hotel Intercontinental is the famous Suhrawardy Uddyan. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave his clarion call for war of liberation on the 7th March, 1971, from this place. Curiously enough, it is here again that the commander of the occupation forces surrendered to allied forces on the 16th December, 1971. International fairs are held here from time to time.

#### *Central Shahid Minar*

Symbolizing the spirit of Bengali nationalism, this monument stands near Dacca Medical College. It was built to commemorate the martyrs of the historic Language Movement of 1952. Although the movement was apparently for the recognition of Bangla as one of the state languages, it was, in fact, the first outburst of popular feelings against the unpopular and autocratic government. All subsequent movements in Bangladesh

leading to its independence owe their origin to this movement and, therefore, the monument has become a place of pilgrimage for millions of Bengalis. During the last phase of the liberation war, the Minar (Memorial) was demolished, but after Independence it was rebuilt.

#### *Savar*

Savar, about 20 miles from Dacca, on the Asian Highway, is the site of the National Martyrs' Monument. This monument is being built to commemorate the Martyrs of the Liberation War of 1971. There is also a German-sponsored cattle project at Savar.

#### *The High Court*

Located near the center of Dacca is the High Court building. One of the most beautiful in Dacca, this is an imposing building, and near to it are the tombs of some famous modern Bengali political figures such as "Sher-e-Bangla" Fazlul Huq and H. S. Suhrawardy, some Moghuls and some Muslim holy men.

#### *Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Complex*

Situated between Mirpur and Airport Roads, this is to be the legislative and administrative capital of Bangladesh. The complex was designed by the American architect Louis Kahn and is a striking and unusual use of shapes in concrete and brick. It is planned to provide accommodation for the National Assembly, its members, government offices, officers and staff.

#### *Old Dacca*

The Chowkbazar section of Old Dacca has dozens of small shops and stalls in narrow, winding streets.

The main river front of the city, Sadarghat, lies on the bank of the river Buriganga. Steamers, launches and boats regularly run from this ghat to all the river fronts throughout the country, connecting them with the capital city. A visit to the congested Sadarghat ferry terminal



is a good starting point for an exploration of Old Dacca. The teeming river life can best be viewed from a country boat which can be hired for only a few taka.

### **Balda Garden**

Situated near the Christian cemetery at the junction of Hatkhola and Madan Mohan Basak Roads, Balda Garden has a rare collection of botanical specimens including flower plants collected from different corners of the world. Attached to the garden, there is also a museum which has a collection of weapons of various kinds.

### **Dacca Museum**

The rich cultural heritage of Bangladesh can be seen in a visit to the Dacca Museum. It contains a large number of interesting collections including sculptures and paintings of the Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim periods. The museum also has a rich collection of old coins, metal images, books on art, ivory and silver filigree works, textiles including the world famed "muslin" fabric, arms and ammunition of bygone warriors, varieties of fine handicrafts, and models of the village and town life.

### **Mosques**

Dacca is known as the city of 700 mosques. *Star Mosque* is perhaps the most beautiful mosque in the city and is notable for its external ornamentation. The attractive *Seven-domed Mosque* is situated at the northern end of Sat Masjid Road; it was built in 1680. The massive *Chowk Mosque* is located at Chowkbazar. Nawab Shaista Khan constructed it in the year 1675. Nawab Murshid Kuli Khan built the big and beautiful *Begumbazar Mosque* in 1709. It is known as Kartalab Khan's mosque. A peculiarity of this mosque is that two side-domes of the building are shaped like Bangladeshi *dochala* (two-roofed sheds). The *Mosque of Ichajeh Shahbaz*, another beautiful mosque of the period is located at the south of Ramna Suhrawardy Uddyan (Race Course). Of the newly constructed mosques, the *Baitul-Mukarram* near the stadium is not only a very big one, it is also novel in design; it is constructed in the shape of the Kaaba, the mosque at Mecca.

### **Lalbagh Fort**

The fort of Aurangabad, popularly known as the Lalbagh fort, was built in 1678 by Prince Mohammad Azam, son of the Moghul Emperor Arrangazeb who was then the Viceroy of Bengal. The fort is a three-storied structure with two gates. The southern gate still stands in a comparatively preserved condition. Outstanding among the edifices in the Lalbagh Fort is the tomb of Pari Bibi, the daughter of Nawab Shaista Khan who succeeded Prince Azam as the Viceroy. An interesting feature of this building is that it has no masonry dome. The entire dome is constructed with bronze sheets.

### **University of Dacca**

The University of Dacca has a glorious history of its own. Established in the year 1921, its new and very impressive campus is a unique "beauty spot" of the city.

*Curzon Hall*, now forming a part of the science faculty of Dacca University, was originally built to accommodate the Legislative Assembly of the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, which was formed in 1905 and annulled in 1911. The Hall was named after Lord Curzon, then Viceroy of India. The imposing structure of the building is a splendid blend of the Indo-British and Moghul styles of architecture.

### **Ramna Park and Lake**

Ramna Park is a vast stretch of green ground, surrounded by a serpentine lake. It is a popular spot for relaxation and angling. The beautifully landscaped park provides a serenely calm atmosphere in the otherwise busy metropolis.

### **Narayanganj**

Ten miles from Dacca, on the bank of the river Sitalakhya, Narayanganj is the center of the jute trade in Bangladesh and is a thriving river port. Several jute mills, some cotton mills, and a dockyard for building steamers and barges have made it an industrial center.

### **Naopara**

Naopara, ten miles from the city center, on the eastern bank of the Sitalakhya River on the Dacca-Narsingdi Road, is a village of Jamdani (Dacca Muslin) weavers set in a picturesque set-



ting. Visitors can purchase Jamdani saris from the weavers.

### *Dhamrai*

Dhamrai, an old Hindu town noted for its 16th century Madhava Temple and beautiful brasswork, is situated on the Bausi River off the Dacca-Aricha Highway about 25 miles from the city. Dhamrai is especially attractive in June during the Chariot Festival when a large fair is arranged.

### *Mainamati*

Mainamati, on the outskirts of Comilla town, is where recent excavations have laid bare ruins of a civilization, mainly Buddhist, that flourished in this part of Bangladesh more than a thousand years ago. The site contains a monastery, shrines, Stupas and a museum.

### *Sylhet*

Tea gardens, deep forests with tigers, deer, panthers and wild boar roaming about, scented orange groves, and colorful tribesmen are but a few of the many attractions which Sylhet offers. This land of hills and dales has 132 tea gardens spreading over an area of 78,000 acres of land and plays an important role in the economy of Bangladesh.

### *Chittagong - Gateway to Bangladesh*

Chittagong is a large and thriving port city set amid lovely natural surroundings studded with greenclad knolls, coconut palms, mosques and minarets against the background of the silver-blue waters of the Bay of Bengal. It is an ancient town and centuries ago merchants from China, Arabia, Persia, Portugal and England visited it. The port city of Chittagong is a big center of commerce and a huge industrial complex has grown up there. Steel mills, oil refinery, paper mills and rayon mills are some of the important industrial units.

Places of interest in Chittagong:

#### *Tomb of Sultan Bayzid Bostami (Turtle Tank)*

Situated on a hillock in Nasirabad, about four miles to the northwest of Chittagong town, this holy shrine attracts a large number of visitors and pilgrims. At

its base is a large tank with several hundred tortoises. Tradition has it that these animals are the descendants of the spirits who were cast into this shape because they incurred the wrath of the great saint who visited the place about 1,100 years ago. Climbing the steps above the tank leads one to the tombs of revered personages from ages past. One tomb bears the date, 1356 A.D. Besides the religious significance, this site gives a picturesque view of Chittagong city.

### *War Cemetery*

In a well-preserved cemetery situated at a quiet place within the city lie buried over 700 soldiers from Commonwealth nations who laid down their lives during World War II. Off to one side lies an equally well-tended section honoring the Japanese dead.

### *The Court Building*

Situated on the Fairy Hills, this building commands a magnificent bird's eye view of the city of Chittagong and the port. There is a small park in which to sit to watch the panorama on the streets below. This is an especially beautiful spot at night when the lights from the ships in the harbor illumine the entire area.

### *The Circuit House*

This building, set in a spacious green lawn on a hill facing the stadium, is perhaps the only example of fine Victorian architecture in Bangladesh. Roofed with red teakwood shingles, the gabled two-storied building has a marble entryway, teak-panelled fireplaces, a teak-floored Durbar and Dance Hall, and twelve additional large rooms. It was the former residence of the British governors.

### *Ethnological Museum*

This museum, located in the Agrabad section of Chittagong, is devoted to the tribal culture. Life-size models, artifacts, pictures, and well-designed dioramas present the life of the tribal people.

### *Foy's Lake*

Set amidst hills and wild foliage, this spot which is just five miles from Chittagong is an ideal place for picnics and outings. Rowing on the lake is allowed.



## *Sea Beaches*

The Patenga Beach is about 14 miles from Chittagong on a very fine road, three miles beyond the airport. Whether at high tide with the waves lashing the breakwater or at low tide when one can walk for miles along the sand, this is a delightful place for a picnic.

Fouzdarhat Sea Beach is about 10 miles from Chittagong up the Dacca Trunk Road. This is also a lovely spot for enjoying the sea breezes. Directly across the road is the Fouzdarhat Cadet College, a 250-acre complex where young men receive military and general education.

## *Sitakund*

About 23 miles north of Chittagong lies the ancient village known as Sitakund. The Shiva Temple on Chandranath Hill at Sitakund is one of the most sacred places for Hindu pilgrims. This temple is situated at an elevation of 1,155 feet. In the vicinity there are also salt water springs, hot springs, and natural gas deposits which ignite on contact with air. This area is sacred not only to the Hindus but also to the Buddhists. The Buddhist Temple supposedly bears a footprint of Lord Buddha.

## *Kaptai*

A visit to Kaptai in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, having the largest man-made lake, is a rewarding experience. The lake was formed by damming the Karnaphuli river, a project completed after several years of hard labor by thousands of workers. Once the area was a dense forest, where wild elephants, tigers and leopards roamed and no man could dare to penetrate it. But now it is the site of the principal hydroelectric project of Bangladesh, generating 80,000 kilowatts of power for industrial and domestic use. The area around Kaptai is now served by excellent roads and all the modern amenities are available there. Speed boats are available for rides on the lake. Tourist bungalows are modern and rent at reasonable rates.

## *Cox's Bazar*

Ninety-four miles south of Chittagong by road is Cox's Bazar, having the world's longest stretch of beach sloping gently into the blue waters of the Bay of Bengal. The wide beach, with silvery-golden sand, safe from sharks, stretches nearly 70 miles. The sea is superb for swimming, and the spectacle of the sun setting beyond the waves of the Bay is fascinating and colorful.



## CHAPTER 4

### THE RELIGIONS OF BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is a religious country. Mosques (Muslim places of worship), Hindu and Buddhist temples, and shrines of the revered saints fill the cities and dot the countryside. The year is punctuated by religious festivals and holidays. To a Bangladeshi, religion is very similar to nationality. East Pakistan was an Islamic state, but the constitution of Bangladesh grants all religions the freedom to preach, practice, and propagate their faith. The adherents of the major religions in this country can be catalogued statistically as:

Muslim .....	85%
Hindu .....	14%
Buddhist, Animist, Christian .....	1%
(Christian less than ¼%)	

Since religion plays such an important part in the everyday life of the people, it is imperative to know some of the basic beliefs of the various groups.

#### ISLAM

Islam was introduced to this area by traders and conquerors over five hundred years ago. It has a very strong hold upon the minds of the people. The basic doctrines are summed up in the Five Pillars of Faith:

1. *Confession* — "I testify that there is no God but Allah. I testify to His unity and that He has no partner; I testify that Mohammed is His servant and His messenger."
2. *Prayer* — At five stated times each day, the Muslim is to perform a ceremonial washing. Following this he faces the holy city of Mecca and, assuming various positions, recites his Arabic prayers.
3. *Fasting* — Various periods of fasting are required, the most important being the month of Ramzan. For 28 days, no food, water, or even saliva is to be swallowed from sunup to sundown.
4. *Alms-giving* — Annual offerings equal to 1/40 of his possessions are required of each believer. A portion

of the alms is to go to the poor and destitute.

5. *Pilgrimage to Mecca* — The most significant religious act that a Muslim can perform is the journey to the holy city of Mecca.

Islam teaches that salvation is earned by gaining enough merit through the practice of these Pillars to outweigh the penalty of sin. In Islam there is the concept that God has tied each man's *karma* (destiny) around his neck. There is no way to escape that, no way to improve or change it. "What is written is written." All will be as Allah wills it.

#### HINDUISM

Three basic principles characterize the Hindu religion. First, it is not a missionary religion. That is, there is no effort made to win converts to Hinduism. To be a Hindu, one must have Hindu parents. Secondly, Hindus are idolatrous to an astounding degree. Temples and holy places have many idols. Homes and shops have pictures of their favorite gods and goddesses. The orthodox Hindus staunchly defend idolatrous worship, though the more progressive and educated are not usually interested in religion. There are numerous *puja* (worship) days set apart to honor their gods by offering flowers and fruit, by frenzied drum-beating and ringing of bells, and, on special occasions, by offering the blood of animals. Thirdly, the Hindu religion is very philosophical and extremely pantheistic. A rich literary heritage is found in the lyrical myths of their gods and goddesses.

Hindus strongly believe in reincarnation, by which is meant that following his death a person is reborn in another body. Whether his future state is a higher or a lower form depends upon his actions during this life.

#### BUDDHISM

This religion is a splinter from Hinduism. Buddha turned his back on pleasure and position and renounced the



world. For many years he searched for the "Way." His teachings, known as the Sevenfold Path of Life, are generally good and moral, but Buddha was an agnostic and a strong believer in the reincarnation of the soul. The Buddhist plan is to meditate the realities of life away. To aid in this program of meditation, there are numerous Buddhist monasteries. Every boy in this religion is expected to spend one to two years living and studying in a monastery. The Buddhist priests generally have shaved heads and wear bright saffron-colored robes. Buddha preached against idolatry, but today his followers reverently worship the thousands of gold, ivory, and wooden statues of his image.

### ANIMISM

Animism is the belief that natural phenomena and animate or inanimate things all possess a soul and must be worshipped. Many of the tribal people, while nominally claiming to be Hindu, Buddhist, or even Christian, are in reality animists. They place their trust in charms, spells, and fetishes. Often their spirit worship is devil worship, as the people try to appease the evil spirit whom they identify as the devil. In a tribal village, our missionaries watched the people pour a large bucket of cow blood over a highly decorated tree stump in an attempt to ward off evil. The crops in the fields are

"protected" by hollow balls pinned to a stake in the ground.

### STATUS OF CHRISTIANITY

The Christian community, due to its small size, has not been a significant force in Bangladesh. During the 16th century, Portuguese sailors, pirates, and traders came to India. Their influence introduced Roman Catholicism to the sub-continent. The Portuguese intermarried with the local people and today many in the Roman Catholic community have surnames such as Gomes, Dias, Penheiro, Gonzalves. Each major city has a Catholic community with church, school and, often, social welfare agencies. Since the percentage of Catholics is higher than that of Protestants, many people assume all Christians are Catholics.

The Baptist Missionary Society, founded by William Carey, was the pioneer Protestant agency in Bengal. In 1793, the first Protestant church was formed in Dinajpur by Carey and his associates. Children of the first converts were considered Christians because their parents were Christians, as is a common practice with the other religions of the country. Many never experienced salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. As a result, today there are some churches scattered throughout Bangladesh which, due to a lack of proper teaching and discipline, contain unbelievers as members.



## CHAPTER 5

### MUSLIM FESTIVALS

The Muslim calendar months are fixed by the moon; therefore, the Eids (Muslim festivals) change each year by approximately ten days, e.g., October 20, 1980, October 10, 1981. Every 32 years the Eid falls on the same day. Below are listed the major Muslim festivals, including a section on the month of Ramzan. These are listed in order according to date.

*Eid-ul-Azha* (Baqr Eid) — festival of sacrifice celebrated on the 10th day of the Muslim month, Zilhaj. Commonly referred to as the Korbani sacrifice, it is the most important of the Muslim feasts. It is the sacrifice made to Allah as an offering by the pilgrims in connection with the ceremonies of the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). While the pilgrims assembled at Mecca are offering it as one of the concluding rites of the pilgrimage, it is faithfully observed simultaneously by Muslims everywhere. (In actuality, the Eid prayer is said on the 9th on Zilhaj in Mecca, but elsewhere on the 10th. The sacrifice may be made any day from the 9th to the 12th of Zilhaj.) Famous Koranic interpreters and commentators emphasize that the sacrifice is not to appease God nor is it a sacrifice for sin. Muslims believe that great merit accrues to all who keep the feast. However, the Koran indicates that the sacrifice itself has no efficacy: "It is not their meat nor their blood that reaches Allah . . ." (Sura 22:37). The authority for this sacrifice is an injunction in the Koran. There is, however, no clear-cut statement in the Koranic passage on sacrifice (Sura 22:34-36) about the meaning of the sacrifice. Making the sacrifice appears to be an act of:

1. *Thanksgiving* — "... thus have we made animals subject to you, that ye may be grateful. (Sura 22:36)
2. *Obedience* — "... but to Him (Allah) is acceptable observance of duty on your part . . ." (Sura 22:37)
3. *Remembrance* — The sacrifice is made in remembrance of Abraham's alleged sacrifice of his son, Ishmael.

The origin is interesting. Soon after coming to Medina, Mohammed observed that Jews kept their great fast of the Atonement (Passover) on the 10th day of the seventh month, as a memorial of the deliverance of Moses and the children of Israel from the hands of Pharaoh. Those were the days when Mohammed was kindly disposed to the Jews, so he and his followers also kept the fast. But when, in the second year, his relations with the Jews became strained, he substituted *Eid-ul-Azha*. Part of the ritual of the pagan Arabs during their annual pilgrimage to Mecca had been the offering of animals in sacrifice. Mohammed now made his newly-substituted feast to fall at the very time when the Arabs were offering their victims near the ancient sanctuary.

The usual celebration takes place as follows. Prayers are said at the *Eid-gah* (place of Eid prayers, usually a large place outside the city proper which has been set aside for such occasions). At the close of the service the worshippers, in happy mood, salute and embrace one another and then settle down to enjoy the rest of the day in feasting and merriment. It is an occasion when people bedeck themselves and their children in new clothes.

The sacrifice itself is offered on returning to their houses. It is a *wajib* (necessary, but not obligatory) duty that every Muslim should keep this feast and sacrifice an animal for himself. This may be a sheep or goat. It is a common practice for a number of Muslims (not more than seven) to join together to sacrifice a large animal, such as a cow or camel, between them. The animal sacrificed must be without blemish or defect of any kind.

When all is ready, the head of the family takes a sheep or a cow to the entrance of his house, places it to face Mecca, and sacrifices it by repeating the bismillah while cutting its throat. Any other mode of slaying the victim is forbidden.

The flesh of the animal is then divided, one-third being given to relatives and



friends, one-third to the poor, and the remainder reserved for the use of the family.

*Ashura* — first ten days of the Muslim month, Muharram, the first month of the Muslim (Hizri) year. It is the anniversary of the tragic death of Husain, grandson of Mohammed, on the field of Karbala. The ceremony varies in different parts but is briefly as follows. As soon as the new moon appears, marking the commencement of the month, people assemble and pronounce a *fatiha* (words from first chapter of Koran) over some sharbat, or sugar, in Husain's name. This is subsequently distributed to the poor. In some districts they then mark out a spot for the pits in which each night bonfires are lighted. Here every night during the festival fires are kindled and the people, old and young, fence with each other across the flames, simulating a fight, and calling out, "Ali! Noble Husain! Noble Husain! Bridegroom! Friend!"

This is sometimes held at a temporary structure, its walls being draped with black cloth, bordered with texts from the Koran. Other places used are similarly decorated and kept brilliantly illuminated. Placed to one side of this are the wooden structures covered with tinsel which represents Husain's mausoleum erected on the plains of Karbala in Iraq, or else the Prophet's tomb at Medina. Near to this are placed imitations of articles supposed to have been used by Husain at Karbala: a turban of gold, a sword, a shield, a bow and arrow. Among numbers of standards is one with a representation of a human hand fixed to the head of the pole. This is a popular emblem representing the five members of the Prophet's family: Mohammed, Fatima, Ali, Hasan, and Husain.

Each evening in this building dense crowds assemble to listen to elegiac poems which are chanted by paid singers in honor of Husain. Someone will mount a kind of pulpit and recite the story of the heartless way in which the foes of Ali put him and his sons to death. Such recitals so stir up the emotions of the people that they repeatedly rise from their places and, with real or feigned grief, beat their breasts, crying out, "Ali! Ali! Husain! Husain!" Yazid, the Khalifa responsible for Husain's death, is cursed.

On the seventh day, processions are formed outside the building and the people parade the streets holding aloft a number of standards reminiscent of those sad events. The chief of these is the standard of Qasim. This is to represent the marriage of Qasim, the son of Hasain, to the favorite daughter of Husain just before the death of the latter. With this event in mind the crowd shouts at intervals, "Bridegroom! Bridegroom!"

On the evening before the 10th day, these standards and wooden structures are taken out in procession. A scene of great confusion ensues, with men and boys running about in quaint disguises. It is the carnival of the Muslim year. The next day is actually Ashura. On this day the wooden structures are stripped of their trappings and conveyed to a large open spot near a river or pond. The water represents the plains of Karbala and serves to recall the agony of thirst experienced by Husain before his death. Into this water the frames are finally thrown.

On the evening of the 12th day, people sit up all night reading the Koran and reciting verses in praise of Husain. On the 13th day a quantity of food is cooked and given to the poor.

*Akheri-Chaha Shamba* — last Wednesday of the Muslim month, Safar, on which the Prophet is said to have experienced some relief from the illness which in the following month terminated his life. It was the last time he performed the legal bathing.

Sweet cakes are prepared and verses from the first chapter of the Koran are said over them. In some sections the strange custom of "drinking the seven salaams" is followed. For this purpose a banana leaf or mango leaf, or a piece of paper, is taken to a *mulvi* (religious leader) who writes seven short sentences from the Koran on it, each of which contains the word "salaam." While the ink is still wet it is washed off in water and the mixture is drunk by the person for whom the writing was made. Peace and happiness are thus insured for the future.

*Eid-i-Milad-un-Nabi* (Bara Wafat) — the day commemorating Mohammed's *milad* (birth) and *wafat* (death), held on the 12th day of the Muslim month, Rabi. (The actual date of his birth is not known.) On the previous evening, per-



fumed lotion is made from sandalwood. This is placed in a vessel and carried in procession to the place of worship, where the first chapter of the Koran is said over it. It is then distributed to the people. This evening ceremony is a sort of public notice that on the morrow the feast day will be celebrated with the usual prayers and offerings. On the morning of the 12th day the Koran is read in the mosque or in private houses, then food is cooked and words of the first chapter of the Koran are said.

Some credulous people possess a stone, believed to bear the impress of the Prophet's footprint. On this day the place in which the stone is kept is elegantly decorated. People assemble in the house for a special ceremony when selected persons recite the story of the birth, miracles, and death of the Prophet. Portions of the Koran are also read and a benediction of praise or intercession offered to Allah for Mohammed is repeated.

*Shab-i-Miraj* — in Islam, the night of ascension of the Prophet Mohammed to heaven. It is said he returned to earth and reported his audience with God. This is celebrated on the 27th day of the Muslim month, Rajab.

*Shab-i-Barat* — this is Persian for the "night of record" and is observed on the 14th or 15th night of the eighth Muslim month, Shaban. Mohammed is alleged to have said that on that night annually God registers in the *barat* (record) all the actions men are to perform in the ensuing year; and all the children of men who are to be born or to die in the year are recorded.

Mohammed enjoined his followers to keep awake the whole night, to repeat certain prayers, and to fast the next day. As a matter of fact, the time is marked by great merriment rather than fasting, and frequently large sums of money are squandered on fireworks. It is also referred to as the "Night of Immunity," "the Night of Exemption," or "the Visitation of the Angels."

*Jumat-ul-wida* — a day of special Friday prayer (Juma), held the last Friday or the Muslim month, Ramzan.

*Shab-i-Khadir* — a night of special prayer on the 27th night of Ramzan. It is believed that prayer on this night is worth one year's prayer. Muslims believe that

on this night the allocation made by Allah (see *Shab-i-Barat*) is finalized for the believer. It was on this night, the "Night of Power," that the Koran descended. For this reason the month of Ramzan was adopted for the fast.

*Eid-ul-Fitr* — "festival of the breaking" of the fast of Ramzan. It commences as soon as the one-month fast of Ramzan is over or, more precisely, on the first appearance of the new moon heralding the tenth month, Shawal. The appearance of the new moon is proclaimed by some prearranged signal, such as the firing of a cannon or siren. It is a time of undisguised relief and rejoicing. Friends hail each other with exclamations such as "chand mubarak" (a happy moon to you).

The festival which is celebrated on the following day is characterized by almsgiving, when propitiatory offerings such as grain, fruit, etc. are made to the poor in the name of God. Having made these offerings, the people gather either in the principal mosque or a large, open area for prayers. When the congregational prayers are completed the *imam* (chief officer in the mosque) takes his place at the pulpit and recites a sermon. At the conclusion he offers a prayer, in which the people join, for the remission of sins, the recovery of the sick, increase of rain, abundance of crops, preservation from misfortune, and freedom from debt. Feasting and merriment, new clothes and gifts mark the day. This day rates with *Korbani* in importance and more nearly parallels our Christmas celebration. Greeting cards are often sent. "Fitr" comes from "Fitra" which means "special alms to the poor." The value of one meal for every member of the family should be given to the poor. If Fitra is not given, it is said that the Ramzan fast is not acceptable to Allah.

*Akika* — ceremony of sacrificing animals and distributing the meat on the occasion of the first shaving and naming of a baby, usually in the first year of the child's life, but may be up to seven years of age or more.

*Ramzan* — although this is not a festival, we feel this should be included in this chapter. Ramzan is the name of the 9th month of the Muslim year. Fasting is the third pillar of Islamic observance and is meritorious at all times, but it is an ab-



solute duty during Ramzan. The fasting is obligatory during the day but eating is permitted at night. The requirement includes abstinence from drinking water or any other liquid, including swallowing one's own spittle. It also forbids smoking. The fast begins at dawn as soon as a white thread may be distinguished from a dark thread. In most cities a cannon is fired or siren sounded at dawn to mark the beginning of the fast and in the evening to indicate the end of the fast.

There is little sleep at night during the month by those who observe the fast, but sleep is allowed during the daylight time of fasting. More social gatherings and night parties than usual are scheduled during this month. When the fast occurs in the hot season, it becomes an ordeal to those who must work all day without a drop of water or a bite of food. Actual prostrations are numerous, but a person who is ill is not required to keep the fast. Others not required to fast are pregnant or nursing women, the aged, children, or those who are traveling. They are, however, expected to make this up at a later date, if possible.

Modern day writers in telling the benefits of observing the month of fasting, write: "Ramzan, above all, teaches us that we should try and check our baser and lustful impulses for our own good as well as for the public weal. This is one lesson we must all adhere to assiduously for saving our souls and saving society and the nation from eventual ruination at a time when symptoms of social degeneration appear all pervasive. The unbridled race for money-making with only the slightest exertion and hence inevitably indulging in limitless corruption, complete defiance of discipline and a reckless scramble for mindless pleasure seeking — all these, and other baneful qualities threaten to engulf civilized existence today. Time has come to build resistance against this deluge towards a dangerously degenerate and self-centered society so that the finer human qualities may prevail. Religion points the way to our salvation." (editorial The Bangladesh Times, July 1980)



## CHAPTER 6

### CALENDAR OF EVENTS AND FESTIVALS

The annual calendar of festivals in Bangladesh provides an array of events. They captivate all by their color and pageantry, as well as by their religious and historical associations. Many of these festivals are dated by the moon, so they may vary a few days one way or another from year to year.

Hindu festivals have originated from mythology. They carry religious efficacy, and food is given to friends and relatives who visit from house to house. Besides other special days, the full moon day, eighth day of the moon, and the new moon day are sacred to the Buddhists. On these days they go to the temple to worship, pray, and give food offerings to Buddha.

#### JANUARY

##### *English New Year*

The English New Year's Day is celebrated by most Christians. The majority of offices and shops are closed. Some churches hold services on New Year's Day.

##### *Dhannya Purnima Broto* (paddy-full moon puja)

This Hindu festival is observed in January after the harvest of winter paddy (rice). There are no idols made but the people worship Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. A small pond is made and a banana tree put on the bank, indicating fruitfulness. Branches of rice are placed around it. This is an offering to Lakshmi before the people eat of the harvest.

#### FEBRUARY

##### *Maghi Purnima*

This is a Buddhist festival held during the full moon in the month of Magh (Bengali calendar). The day commemorates the occasion when Buddha gained "supreme enlightenment." On this day Buddha foretold to his disciples that he would die on the same date that he was born. It happened exactly so. He died at Kushi Nagar, India. Buddhists all over the country gather in their monasteries and offer prayers to Buddha.

##### *Shaheed Dibash*

(National Day of Mourning)

On February 21, 1952, Bengali students successfully opposed the government's attempts to deny the Bengali language the status of state language. Valuable lives were lost. The martyrs are remembered on this day with solemnity and respect. In Dacca, a special function attended by thousands is held at the Central Shaheed Minar (martyr's monument).

##### *Saraswati Puja*

Saraswati is the goddess of learning and wisdom. She is worshipped mainly by the student population. It is the second largest Hindu puja of the year. The companion of Saraswati is the swan on which she rides.

#### MARCH

##### *Independence Day, March 26*

The Bangladeshis declared themselves an independent nation on March 26, 1971. The day starts with a 21-gun salute, followed by military parades, air displays, boat races, and other such functions all over the country.

##### *Dol Jatra or Holi Festival*

This Hindu festival is dedicated to Lord Krishna and the gopis, herds-women among whom the youthful Krishna lived. Many of them left their homes, children, and husbands to dally with Krishna on the banks of the river. They often danced a circular dance in which each gopi imagined she held Krishna's hand. Some of the original ritual survives today in the folk-dancing, erotic games, and the throwing of colored water at one another.

##### *Shiva Ratri Broto*

To the Hindu the supreme god is represented in a triad: Brahma, god of creation; Vishnu, god of preservation; and Shiva, god of destruction and reproduction. While there are images of Brahma and Vishnu, Shiva is most often



represented by a phallic symbol made of stone. This festival to Shiva takes place at midnight or one o'clock at the temples, not houses, on the night of the new moon. There are pilgrimages to Sitakund, Moishkhali Island (near Cox's Bazar), and many other places.

*Easter* (occurs in March or April)

This is the second of the "big days" for Christians. Many churches hold a long service on Good Friday. In some places there are festivals and fairs held on the Saturday, then comes Easter Sunday. There are services at dawn to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. Some of the larger cities have caught on to such Westernisms as Easter eggs and hot cross buns.

## APRIL

*Bengali New Year's Day (Polla Boishakh)*

Like the first of January, the Bengali New Year's day (first day of the Bengali month, Boishakh) is greeted with great joy and merriment. On Bengali New Year's, song sessions and poetry recitals are the highlights of the day.

*Rabindranath Tagore's Birthday (Boishakh 25)*

Nobel-winning poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore's birthday is an important event for all Bangladeshis. Cultural functions honoring Tagore's songs and dances commemorate the day.

*Baishakhi Purnima*

This festival occurs in the month of Baishakh (mid-April to mid-May) on the first full moon night. This day is sacred for the Buddhists for on this day, it is said, Buddha was born, died, and in his meditation received knowledge about the birth, death, and life of men. On this day all the Buddhists go to the temple, listen to the sermons of their *bhikhu* (priests), and burn candles and incense before the idol of Buddha.

## MAY

*May Day (May 1)*

A national holiday, this day is observed by the different labor organizations by holding seminars, symposiums, processions, and cultural functions.

*Kazi Nazrul Islam's birthday (Joishtho 11)*

Rebel poet Nazrul Islam's birthday is celebrated with cultural functions based on his songs and poems.

## JUNE

*Sports and games*

Either at the end of June or beginning of July, the Dacca Metropolitan Football League matches start. It is the biggest recreational event of the year. The interest and enthusiasm of the people is obvious by the presence in Dacca Stadium of thousands who come to watch the soccer matches daily. Regular matches are also held at the stadium in Chittagong.

*Ashari Purnima*

This is observed on the first full moon night of the month of Ashar (mid-June to mid-July). On that day, it is said, Buddha first preached the doctrines of the Buddhist religion in a city in South India. He made a few disciples. From that day he remained with his disciples in one house for three months, teaching them to go out into different countries to preach Buddhism.

## JULY

*Rath Jatra*

This Hindu festival is celebrated with pomp and gaiety on the full moon in the Bengali month of Ashar. At this festival three images are set upon a Juggernaut (cart) and pulled through the streets by devotees. The images are of Jagannath ("lord of the world"), who is a form of Krishna, and his brother and sister. A large number of pilgrims take part in the pulling of the cart. In India, the carts may be enormous, over forty feet high. Here, they are usually about ten feet high. All major Hindu areas have their own Juggernaut which is pulled through the town, the largest festivals being held in Dhamrai (13 miles from Dacca) and in Comilla.

## AUGUST

*Manasha Puja*

(held according to the moon)

Manasha is the goddess of snakes whose cult probably is derived from an archaic form of snake worship. Ancient



man, awed by their mysterious gliding motion and sloughing of their skins, and fearing their poisonous fangs, sought to propitiate the snakes by laying offerings near their lairs. In other parts of India the snakes themselves are objects of worship, but in Bangladesh it is Manasha, as their leader and controller, who is worshipped by the Hindus and who is invoked for protection against snakes.

## SEPTEMBER

### *Birthday of Sree Krishna*

He is considered as God, who became man, in order to redeem the good people and to punish the bad people, and then to establish the reign of truth.

### *Ashwini Purnima*

This comes on the full moon day of Ashwin (mid-September to mid-October). On this day, the Buddhists believe, Buddha went out with his trained disciples into different countries for preaching. This is celebrated by monks preaching in the temples, worshipping Buddha with flowers and candles, and giving of rice and curries to Buddha. The *fanush* (festival of light) is celebrated at this time by sending ignited hot-air balloons into the air.

### *Kathin Chibar Dan*

This festival takes place on any day within one month after Ashwini Purnima. On this day all the Buddhist monks from the surrounding villages come to the temple and, reading from the Scripture book called Tripitok, explain it to the people. The people of the village give away *kathin chibar* (the colored garment of the monk). Each family of the village contributes money according to their means in order to buy these garments.

## OCTOBER

### *Durga Puja*

Durga is a composite goddess embodying a number of local divinities. Durga is portrayed as a notable female warrior. She has ten arms, symbolizing strength, and rides on a lion, symbolizing her invincibility. Durga Puja is the most important of the Hindu festivals celebrated in this country. Most often the

ceremonies are held beside a river or pond, or at the seashore. When the beating of the drums and the frenzied dancing are over, the idol is carried into the water to dissolve rather than being left to dwell among humans and be exposed to decay.

### *Lakshmi Puja*

This is a Hindu festival held during the full moon, five days after Durga Puja. It honors Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, prosperity, success, happiness, and good fortune. She is considered the embodiment of loveliness, charm, and grace, and she often appears standing on the expanded petals of a lotus flower.

### *Feast of the stale soaked rice*

On the last day of the Bengali month, Ashwin, rice is cooked and held over until the next day, which is the first day of the month, Kartik.

## NOVEMBER

### *Shayma (Kali) Puja or Festival of Lights*

The goddess Kali is also called by the names of Sati, Parvati, and Durga. She symbolizes eternal time and hence she both gives life and destroys it. Her appearance is described as a hideous four-armed, emaciated woman with fang-like teeth who devours all beings. She holds a noose, a staff with a skull on the top, and a severed head. These weapons denote her powers of destruction. Her nakedness indicates that she has stripped off all the veils of existence. She is black, indicating eternal night. One of her hands indicates the allaying of terror because she understands the fears of her supplicants. The other hand grants blessings to those who appease her.

Kali's most sacred temple is Kalighat, a suburb of Calcutta. Its importance stems from the myth of her death when her distraught husband, Shiva, wandered about the world carrying his wife's body and threatening to destroy the world. Vishnu intervened and cut up Sati's (Kali's) body into fifty-one pieces which fell to earth in various places, each place becoming sacred because it was imbued with Sati's divine spirit.

This festival takes place on the first day of the new moon. Hindus light candles around their homes and trees.



### *Kartik Puja*

There are many myths associated with the god Kartik. Some say he is the son of Shiva and Parvati. Others say, more exotically, that after appealing to the gods for help in a battle, Shiva assumed six faces, each with a central eye. A spark fell from each eye, landed in a lake, and each became an infant. The infants were nursed by the six mothers who comprise the Pleiades until Parvati squeezed the infants so affectionately they became one body with six heads. This image is seen on ancient Indian coins. As the god of war, Kartik is known as Commander-in-Chief of all other gods. He carries a bow and arrow for a weapon and his companion is the peacock.

## DECEMBER

### *Victory Day (Bijoy Dibosh)*

On December 16, 1971, the Pakistan occupation army surrendered to the joint Bengali-Indian Armed Command. Hence the day is observed all over Bangladesh and by all Bangladeshis with great rejoicing and festivity.

### *Christmas Day December 25th*

This most important Christian celebration is observed by the Christian community. Services are held in the churches on Christmas morning, followed by a meal. While the feast is being prepared, there is much gaiety and laughter, games for the children and group singing.



SECTION II  
**STUDY OF BENGALI CULTURE**



## CHAPTER 1

# GENERAL DISCUSSION OF CUSTOMS AND CULTURE

This study of Bengali culture is being carried on in an attempt to understand the Bangladeshi people and what makes them "tick" — their values, motivations, aspirations — Such an understanding is vital to effective living and working with the people of Bangladesh.

This study aims at a fairly general picture of Bengali culture, rather than going into detail on the differences between the various religious groups in Bangladesh. In the presentation of this material we have included points of American culture and values which are especially pertinent in showing the contrast between the Eastern mind and the Western mind. The thing that impressed us in doing this study is that it must be harder for a Bangladeshi to live a good Christian life than for an American because obedience to God's Word means going against his culture in many more areas than is necessary for an American, whose culture has developed largely on the basis of Christian principles. Perhaps this should give us a little more sympathy and patience in our dealing with our Bangladeshi brothers and sisters in Christ.

Volumes have been written about the social structure, life style, and anthropological background of the Bangladeshi people. To summarize 5,000 years of culture in the confines of this document would be presumptuous. Perhaps we will never understand the Bangladeshi mind, but in order to be effective in this land, we must try.

### *What is culture?*

Culture is a way of behaving, thinking, and reacting. It refers to all learned behavior which is socially acquired. Culture is the sum total of a people's life, action, and thought. In reading of the various ways people do things, we must remember they are different — not inferior, not wrong, not funny, just different — from what we are used to. And yet, don't we Americans do peculiar things, too? Bangladeshi men wear perfume; American men wear after-shave lotion.

Some Bangladeshi women wear nose rings and put black powder around their eyes; some American women wear earrings and put blue powder around their eyes. The list could go on and on. We all need to be careful of our attitudes as we observe people in a culture unknown to us. Egocentricity is a synonym for the sin of pride. Ethnocentricity, the feeling that one's native culture is the best, is equally deplorable.

### *What is the purpose of studying the customs and culture of a people?*

Don Richardson writes in *Lords of the Earth*, "In former years, missionaries considered the culture of a people more or less as incidental. The Holy Spirit intended to achieve the same effect regardless; the cultural factors 'just happened' to align themselves with Him, much as a sea current may help a ship on its way even though the ship has sufficient power to reach its destination if the current flows against it. But in recent years there have been striking examples, especially in primitive cultures, that the Holy Spirit has placed within cultures bridges which help a person cross from what he has always believed to be true to a full understanding of God, Christ, salvation."

Our purpose as missionaries is to communicate Christ and the new way of life made possible through His death. This type of communication requires identification with those to whom we wish to communicate. This involves learning the language and speaking it as they do. It also involves learning their culture, accepting it, and adapting to it as much as possible. We have Biblical precedents for this: the prophet Ezekiel "came to them of the captivity . . . sat where they sat . . . and remained there among them," Ezekiel 3:15; the Apostle Paul wrote, "I am become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake. . . ." I Corinthians 9:19-23.

Communicating the Gospel in a cross-cultural setting requires recognition that



those to whom you are communicating the message will understand it in terms of their own culture. Unless the communicator knows his listener, he may use the correct words but they will be completely misunderstood.

Beyond this, a study of customs and culture gives a basis for understanding and evaluating the behavior of those with whom you deal. It helps to determine what in their behavior is anti-Christian and what is simply a cultural expression. For example, each Christmastime, Bangladeshi Christians enjoy a *kirtan*, hours of singing from house to house. Sometimes the singing is accompanied by drums, cymbals, bells, or other instruments. Often the singing becomes spirited with clapping and dancing. Is this free expression an allowable Christian activity? A careful study of culture can help the missionary sort out what is truly Biblical, and therefore correct, from what is a Western taboo or prohibition.

*What is the background of Bengali culture?*

Although the majority of people in Bangladesh now claim Islam as their religion, their ancestors all came from a Hindu orientation. This accounts for the very strong class distinctions seen in all of the religions, even among the Christians. The myth of origin seems to be embedded deep in the Indian subcontinent: the great god Brahma created the Brahmins from his head, the warrior caste from his shoulders, the merchant caste from his thighs, and the masses from his feet. The *Bhagavad-Gita* teaches that men, according to their *karma* (destiny or fate), are born into specific castes and each must carry out his own caste *dharma*, the duties suited to his caste and hence required of him as part of the immutable order of things. For example:

Brahmin — originally were priests, teachers. Have family names like

Chakraborty, Bhattacharjee, Chattarjee, Banarjee.

Kshatri — originally were warriors.

Vaishya — originally were business men, shopkeepers, clerks, government workers. Have family names like Das, Sen, Paul, Mitro, Dhor.

The above three are known as Aryans, the twice-born. Beneath them come the workers, still more divided into touchable and untouchable or, as used today, scheduled and unscheduled castes:

Shudra (touchable, unscheduled)

Mali — gardener

Napit — barber

Jogi — weaver

Dhopa — washerman

Nomoshudra (untouchable, scheduled)

Jaladas — fisherman

Jarudar — sweeper

Chamar — tanner

Formerly, to a Hindu, caste was the most important thing in life, for it decreed every person's social status and the work he was permitted to do, and affected in one way or other every aspect of living. Nothing could change it. A man born a Shudra, in the lowest caste, must live and die as one; no riches or power that he might acquire could raise him to a higher one, and his children and grandchildren and their children after him to the end of time would always be Sudras. Only a life of great piety and good works might, after his death, make it possible for him to be reborn as a member of a higher caste. Apart from that, there was no way to escape his destiny. Educated people today will say, "Those distinctions don't hold true anymore. We fought together. Now we are all one." But how often we hear the excuse from Hindu and Muslim alike, "To become a Christian means to lower yourself to be a sweeper or a fisherman."



## CHAPTER 2

### DIRECTNESS, OUTSPOKENNESS

(As we move through this study, we will state the overall topic being discussed. Then a statement of the American approach will be given, followed by the comparison of the Bengali attitude toward the same issue.)

*American* — Forthrightness and directness are known to be traits of Americans. Americans are often unwilling to sacrifice efficiency and frankness for euphemism, i.e., stating an unpleasant truth or opinion in as pleasant a way as possible, answering in a way calculated to please, and broaching a potentially unpleasant subject in a way that allows for retreat. Americans feel that euphemism is useless, inefficient, a waste of time and hypocritical.

*Bangladeshi* — The maintenance of smooth interpersonal relationships is a value of prime importance. Thus a Bangladeshi may be forthright with his family and close friends, but will be roundabout in his dealings with others except when angry or quarreling. Smooth interpersonal relationships are more significant in an urban situation where most of one's dealings are with strangers than in a village where most of the people are related.

⑤ Maintaining smooth interpersonal relationships involves using an indirect approach to a problem or discussion of a matter and making every effort to avoid arousal of shame, anger, misunderstanding, or an unnecessary rift in the relationship. If one Bangladeshi must rebuke or correct another he does it in private in a tactful, euphemistic, and reassuring manner. Euphemism is a prime mechanism in maintaining smooth interpersonal relationships. The euphemist cushions a rebuke with tact, showing great concern over the rebuked party's family welfare and health. He asks questions about personal matters to ease over the unpleasantness of the rebuff in order to let the other party know he is still accepted and treated on the same basis as before.

Such use of euphemism and the indirect approach is very noticeable in the

Bengali culture. Bangladeshis are typically Oriental in that they sit and chat about other subjects before they begin to talk about the matter on their minds. Even then they don't always come right out and state their point clearly. They may talk around it and hint at it until you get the point.

One of the things that bothers Bangladeshis most about Americans is our lack of tact in communicating with them. If someone is late we say, "You're late, I can't talk to you now." Or if we're busy we say, "This isn't the time to come. I can't see you now," and walk away. A Bangladeshi would never speak like that. He will usually give the person at least a few minutes of his time and then, if absolutely necessary, he might say, "Please don't mind. I have a very important work right now but I'll send my son to talk with you." His tone of voice will be sweet and his words designed to make the other person feel good even though what he must say is not what the other person wants. Bangladeshis sugar-coat their words and often are offended by our lack of sugar-coating. They misunderstand our directness and think we are angry with them when we speak in that way. For example:

1. We had been led to believe that a certain young woman we were working with was a widow. Then we began hearing about a man frequenting her house. We called in a Bengali Christian woman to investigate the situation. In talking with the young woman, the older woman never referred to the accusations; rather she broached the subject in this way: "We've heard something about you" ( *তোমার বিষয়ে আমরা কি যেন শুনেছি* ). That was sufficient to provoke a confession of the matter.
2. A clinic run by foreigners in Chittagong stayed open on a government holiday. A Bangladeshi gentleman suggested to the foreigner in charge that the clinic should be closed that day and received this blunt reply, "We don't mind the government holidays." This provoked the Bangladeshi man to respond, "We'll make you mind them!" The



reaction of other Bangladeshis to this incident was, "Why couldn't the foreigner just have said, 'We opened it in case any seriously ill people need help. If this is not the case, we'll close it for the day.' It wasn't necessary to answer as the foreigner did."

3. One day several items turned up missing from our Literature Division office. Subash Azim, who was in charge that day, waited until all the other employees had gone to their respective tasks, then called together those who were suspected. He beat around the bush, talked sweetly, said he wasn't accusing them, and then gave a warning not to do it again.

Bangladeshis are sometimes offended by the direct way in which we say things and by the way in which we come to the point immediately, but on the other hand, another thing that bothers Bangladeshis about us is our *lack* of frankness with regard to things that involve them, that is, our failure to explain the reasons why we have done something or why we can't do something for them. Our reaction often is, "But it's none of their business," a Western concept which Bangladeshis find difficult to understand. We could probably improve our relationship with Bangladeshis considerably by being willing to explain our actions, thus avoiding the spreading around of their speculations, which are usually wrong.

For example, when it is necessary to dismiss an employee it might be wise to call the rest of the staff together and explain why this action is being taken. Then everyone hears and knows the same thing. When we are leaving the country and people ask us to bring back things for them, we should explain clearly why we can't. We could preface our explanation with, "If we could bring it we would, but we can't because . . .", then explain the problem of limited foreign currency, customs regulations, etc. The rule is, be frank but polite, with a sweet expression (সিঁটি মুখ). You can refuse anything if you do it with a সিঁটি মুখ.

### *Use of a go-between*

Another important mechanism in the maintaining of smooth interpersonal relationships is the use of a go-between or mediator to prevent injury or shame, to heal a breach between quarreling parties,

to help in the mending of hurt feelings, or to avoid a direct unpleasantness between two individuals. The go-between is used in three main areas:

1. *marriage arrangements*, both for making arrangements and for getting the two families to agree to the marriage if they are opposed, such as in cases where the prospective bride and groom have chosen each other.
2. *settlement of disputes*, with a view to avoiding violence and taking of revenge. The most frequent causes of disputes are arguments over land, animals, and wives. Usually the mediator in land disputes and fights is a group of village elders called *মালিনী*. If their judgement is rejected by the parties involved, the matter is taken to the court. Most often, however, the decisions of the village leaders are accepted.
3. *dissuasions from the wrong path*. If a young person is going astray, the family will call on his good friends or a respected teacher or older person to dissuade him.

The person chosen as go-between is someone who is respected by the party to be dealt with, someone to whom that party will pay attention. In problems between tenants of the same landlord, the landlord is a good go-between. As missionaries we are frequently called upon to give advice or a word of correction to young people. To illustrate:

The parents of two girls who had misbehaved at camp asked us to talk to the girls to try and help them see what they had done wrong and why it was wrong. The parents felt the girls would pay attention to what we said.

When a girl entered college, her mother asked a missionary to explain to the girl some of the pitfalls and problems she might encounter, and to encourage her to remain true to the teaching she had received in her home. Again, this was because the missionary's words would make a greater impression than those of the girl's own family.

It seems that Bangladeshis do not resent a missionary rebuking them directly if the missionary's attitude and approach is right. Such rebuking should be done



privately. If the help of another Bangladeshi is needed, that person should be someone respected by the party to be rebuked. It is especially important that the missionary know both sides of the matter and have determined the truth before giving a rebuke. One of the most common complaints Bangladeshis make against missionaries is that missionaries are partial or play favorites (এক চোখে) and judge without knowing all the facts. If the matter involves two Bangladeshis, get both parties together for a discussion of the problem.

Bangladeshis determine whether or not they will use a direct approach in dealing with a person on the basis of their understanding of the other person and how he will react. It is probably unreasonable to expect that a Bangladeshi will be open with us and frankly express his opinion unless we have developed a close relationship with him so that he trusts and respects us. When we want to know someone's honest feelings about a matter, perhaps it would be wise to use a go-between in whom the other person will confide and who himself will be open with us.

### *Developing a sensitivity to other people*

Perhaps Americans are the worst possible people to be used in a cross-cultural outreach. Most Americans are geared toward getting the job done and, in the process, they might consciously, or most likely unconsciously, ride roughshod over the people around them — a sort of "bull in the china shop" approach. The foreigner needs to work hard at observing what is considered just common courtesy in this country, and not needlessly offend the Bangladeshi people.

It is important to learn the language, but that is not enough. The right use of

idiom, intonation, and fluctuation of tone all need to be mastered. Often the way the foreigner talks inflicts perpetual insult upon the Bangladeshis. They will be generous and tolerate the insults but that is no reason to allow the mistakes to continue. Perhaps the foreigner will never be told outright what he is saying or doing which is considered offensive. There may be two reasons for keeping quiet: the Bangladeshi wants to please the foreigner, either because he feels his job depends upon that or just because he himself is too polite to correct a person outside of his immediate group. The other reason may be simply a feeling that the foreigner ought to know better himself — "any fool would know that."

One much-loved Bangladeshi Christian worker and friend told us of a recurring situation which had caused much embarrassment to him and to other Bangladeshi workers. When a respectable person, who is unknown to us, shows by his conversation that he is at home in English, he expects to be answered in that language. He will be offended by our insistence on using Bengali. If, on the other hand, the person is struggling to use English because he assumes the foreigner does not know Bengali, then just speaking a few words of Bengali to show it is understood eases the pressure on the speaker. In many instances each speaker speaking his mother tongue, or a happy mixture of both languages by both parties, is the best solution, the point being that each speaker does his best to make the other party comfortable and maintain his dignity. A rule of thumb is, converse in the language with which the Bangladeshi has begun the conversation. It is best not to switch to another language unless he suggests it.



### CHAPTER 3

## INDIVIDUALITY VERSUS CONFORMITY TO THE GROUP

*American* — The emphasis is on the individual.

*Bangladeshi* — <sup>৬</sup>The Bangladeshi place great emphasis on the group ( বাড়ী, সমাজ ) rather than on the individual. This can be seen in that they usually say *our* house ( আমাদের বাড়ী ) *our* country ( আমাদের দেশ ) rather than *my* ( আমার ). The individual is seen as the entire group to which he belongs. This is called the principle of equivalence; the individual is equivalent to the group. What one person does reflects on the group. A wrong action of one brings shame on his group; a good action or success of one brings glory to his group.

To do something against an individual Bangladeshi is to arouse the ire of the group because the individual stands for the group and must be upheld by the group. Thus there is solidarity within a group, and group protection of one member if he is attacked in any way is assured. Revenge may be sought by all in the group, e.g. a whole village. Criticism of an individual involves his entire family and/or group. <sup>৭</sup>

One day after church someone made a disparaging remark about a Christian from Barisal. This provoked a fight some days later between the two parties, with a group of Barisalis present to support their

man. Some who fought for Barisal had not, in fact, been born there but they had family there and, therefore, considered anyone from Barisal as their own people ( দেশী ).

<sup>৮</sup>In return for the protection of the group, the individual is expected to conform to the will of the group. Group pressure, the pressure to stay in fellowship with the group, is extremely strong. A Bangladeshi maintains his role in the group by conformity and does not like to be judged as an individual. <sup>৯</sup>Personal achievement or gain requires sharing with the "in" group, e.g. a party for which the one who made the gain bears the expense. Sometimes Bangladeshis will tend to ignore or not wish to become involved in the problems of people not within their own group. They might suggest to the person in need that he seek help from "his own people."

Within the villages and the cities of Bangladesh there is a "village (para) spirit." Even though the village may be made up of people from various religions, they will band together for their common welfare and defense of their way of life. The exception to this, of course, would be during times of communal disturbances when a person's religion takes precedence over all other factors.



## CONTROLLING BEHAVIOR: GUILT VERSUS SHAME

**American** — The chief control over behavior is guilt based on standards of right and wrong. Shame provides an outer control to some extent but the American asks himself, "Is this right or wrong?" There is individual sanction of action.

**Bangladeshi** — Shame or embarrassment (লজ্জা) is a primary social control; that is, it causes a person to try to keep himself in a socially acceptable position. Shame keeps a Bangladeshi from a prohibited action and thus provides control over his behavior. A child is guided in knowing what is acceptable behavior by the expression "for shame!" (ছি! ছি!) . When a person has done something wrong or is contemplating a wrong course of action, a commonly heard expression is, "Have you no shame? (তোমার লজ্জা নাই?) The Bangladeshi governs his

behavior by asking himself, "What will people say?" Thus he seeks group sanction for his actions.

In our attempt to understand how Bangladeshi people think and feel, it is necessary to know what behavior is considered shameful. A very tiny child would be given warnings: "Don't use your left hand;" "Don't put your feet on anyone or on a holy object;" "Don't call an older person by his given name or use the familiar form of speech with him." As a child grows older he learns that there are severe sanctions against answering back to an elder and staring at a person while talking to him. The thing which is considered the severest insult, and therefore the most shame-provoking, is speaking in an abusive manner about a person's parents (বাপ-মা ভুলে গালাগালি দেওয়া) .

৫



## CHAPTER 5 SELF-ESTEEM

*American* — An American generally does not outwardly show any damage done to his self-esteem. He may keep these feelings bottled up inside until they cause serious damage to his health and welfare.

*Bangladeshi* —

### *Pride*

Maintenance of self-esteem, which derives largely from a feeling of social acceptance, is extremely important. Involved in this is a person's sense of personal worth, his individual dignity, his need to be treated as an important person. One of the chief factors for a Bangladeshi in maintaining self-esteem is the fulfillment of social obligations (লোক-লোকিকতা) particularly in the areas of hospitality and courtesy. Most Bangladeshis are characterized by a feeling of scrupulousness with regard to observing social obligations (চক্কু লজ্জা).

### *Offense*

The Bangladeshi is quick to take offense and show his reaction when his self-esteem is damaged. Fear of insult (অপমান) is a significant factor in Bengali life; in fact, it plays a large part in regulating a person's behavior. Some situations which would cause a person to feel insulted would be: saying abusive things about his parents; answering back to an elder; staring at a person while he is talking to you; putting your hands on a person in anger; forcibly removing a person from a place; speaking rudely or roughly; undermining a person's authority; rebuking a person in public.

### *Criticism*

Criticism (সমালোচনা) of an individual in one area, e.g. his work, carries over to the whole of his self-esteem, and casts reflection on his entire person and his family as well. Thus criticism and correction are offered in a roundabout way and confrontation is avoided. Expressions of criticism are prefaced with "please excuse me" (আপনি কিছু মনে করবেন না) or "don't be sad" (মনে দুঃখ নিও না) to soften the criticism and avoid insult.

Unfortunately, this fear of criticism carries over into the spiritual realm. Some fine believers are afraid to give a testimony as to what the Lord has done for them for fear of others criticizing them or saying, "Oh, you have become holy now!"

### *Excuse*

Admittedly it is difficult for an American to own up to the fact that he has done something wrong, but when clearly faced with it, he is apt to admit it without making up elaborate excuses.

It is extremely difficult for a Bangladeshi to admit a mistake. If he is criticized or accused of wrong, he will offer an excuse, and it is expected that his excuse will be accepted and the whole matter dropped. If he does admit his wrong he will usually try to lighten it with an excuse:

A Bangladeshi Christian, in asking forgiveness publicly for a wrongdoing, said, "As human beings we all do things that are wrong. I am human so I did this. Forgive me."



## CHAPTER 6

### STATUS

**American** — Americans derive their sense of status chiefly from wealth and possessions, and from the place they have achieved in society through their own efforts.

#### **Bangladeshi —**

##### **Source of Status**

The Bangladeshi derives his sense of status, and thus his self-esteem, from the following factors: wealth, background, family, dialect, education. Wealth is the chief factor, education the least significant. Recognition of status is indicated by use of honorific terms of address and reference, and the practice of serving people according to status rather than on a "first-come, first-serve" basis.

Americans tend to come into conflict with Bangladeshis in the area of recognition of status because of our strong orientation toward democratic principles and equality. We want to treat everyone equally but this concept is foreign to the status-conscious Bengali culture. Bangladeshis expect that people on different levels will be treated differently, and they resent our attempts to force equality and our failure to observe status differences.

This thought-provoking statement in the July, 1975 Reader's Digest should be considered: "Equal treatment of people in unequal circumstances is inequality." This area of equality seems to be an important area in which we need to study seriously the Biblical teaching and its application in the Bengali culture. This does not mean that there will never be any fellowship or feeling of oneness among Christians from various backgrounds. As Christ rules in the heart these barriers can begin to be broken down, "For He is our peace who made both one and broke down the middle wall of partition" (Ephesians 2:14). In the beginning, however, we would do well to work within the framework and thought patterns of the people of this country.

Bangladeshi Christians readily agree that there should be equality among Christians within the church in things

related to church life and worship, but they don't feel that this should be carried over into such areas as arranging of marriages, educational provision, housing facilities, etc.

One middle-class Bangladeshi Christian family has raised a lower-class child as part of their family. Although they consider her their daughter and love her as one of their own, they do not treat her as they do their own children. They realize that due to her low class background and her inability to do well in school, they will not be able to arrange a marriage for her with a boy from a middle or high class family. Hoping to prevent marital problems in the future, they do not want to accustom her to a higher style of living now than she will have when she marries.

##### **Status symbols**

Some important Bengali status symbols are: the engaging of an expensive private tutor for children; possession of gold, silver, car, radio, T.V., a big house; apparel worn in public (some men will not be seen outside their homes in a lungi); expensive Korbani sacrifice for Muslims and puja celebration for Hindus; ability to treat friends to food or entertainment; giving of feasts to celebrate specified occasions. This last point is so important to the Bangladeshi that he does not hesitate to go into debt to whatever extent is necessary to fulfill his social obligations and thus maintain his self-esteem and acceptance in his group.

As Amy Carmichael explains in her excellent book *Mimosa*, "Throughout the entire Indian Sub-Continent, to be in debt is nothing. You may be richly jewelled and yet be in debt. No one thinks anything of that, not even the creditor. It is true that the paying off of the interest on debts can be a worrisome item, but as long as a little is doled out to the creditor from time to time, the situation can continue throughout a person's entire lifetime, and sons yet to be born can pay off the debt."

In fact, Amy Carmichael explains, "If



you have no debt, does it not follow that no one trusts you enough to lend you anything and from that is it not obvious that you are a person of small consequence?"

The occasions for which a feast is expected and for which a person would willingly go into debt are: daughter's wedding; birth of a baby; passing a major exam; moving into a new house; baby's first-rice ceremony. We need to recognize how important this type of celebration is to Bangladeshis and make every effort to attend when invited, even when the person is poor. We should not deny a poor person the right to maintain his self-esteem; however, if you know the person can't afford to give a feast, it is a good idea to encourage him to reduce his feast to a tea, thus keeping his celebration more within reason.

### *Lowering status*

To an American, all honest work is honorable. There is scarcely any job which he would refuse to do. The situation is quite the opposite in the Bangladeshi mind. A Bangladeshi might choose to starve to death rather than engage in a job which he considers beneath him.

There seems to be a very subtle difference between the words "employment" (চাকরি) and "business" (ব্যবসা). We might ask a woman what work her husband does, only to hear her reply, "Oh, no, my husband doesn't work; he is in business." The business might be selling betel nut and cigarettes from a hole-in-the-wall shop but he is his own employer. Many a man would rather stay at home and do nothing than go out to work for someone else. It is more dignified to be in business than merely to work. The following activities are considered undignified and lower a person's status in the Bangladeshi mind: carrying market purchases home; sweeping the house or any other of a sweeper's jobs; doing manual labor; carrying loads on the head; raising pigs; selling fish; etc.

A respectable middle-class retired man takes care of his own cows, cleaning, feeding, etc. The neighbors frequently remark about his doing that work himself.

Bangladeshis of the middle and upper classes often will not engage in activities which cause a lowering of status, or at

least will not let others see them doing those things. However, there seems to be the feeling that it is good for us missionaries to do such things as sweeping, manual labor, etc. if we want to, as an example that there is really nothing dishonorable about these activities! Apparently people don't respect us less for doing them.

Lowering of status applies not only to employment but also to living below the standard expected of you.

A foreign sahib teaching in a local school was observed eating at a roadside stall. Later, when traveling outside the city, he expressed concern over the cost of the bus fare. Bangladeshi Christians who were friends of the man felt it necessary to warn him he could lose the respect of everyone, including his students, by his niggardly attitude. One Bangladeshi Christian went so far as to say, "I'll take him out to a Chinese restaurant myself, though I can little afford it, rather than have him disgrace himself and me by eating in a cheap public place."

### *Rise in status*

It is not common to see a person from a lower status rise to a higher one. In fact, Bangladeshis resist this for two possible reasons: 1) envy (দ্বন্দ্ব) — the idea of "why should he get such an opportunity and not me?" 2) the problem that a person's mentality will not increase with the rise in his status.

Sheik Mujib has been cited as an example of this. He was hailed as the "Father of the Nation." He became President, but he was still a village boy, a farmer's son. He did not have the capabilities to fulfill his role. We saw an object lesson concerning this in our Literature office one day:

Our very poor sweeper was clearing away debris from a building project of the landlord's. He asked, and we gave, permission for him to take home a few old sticks of bamboo. But the landlord, watching from next door, screamed at and berated the poor man when he began to take them out the gate. The Bangladeshi staff, seeing this, said, "He's a small man; he must have come up from a low background."

Americans, raised on stories of Abe Lincoln and his rise from poverty and illiteracy to the presidency, are eager to



give every person the advantage of expanding to the best of his ability. Sometimes that works here; more often the person is left in limbo, belonging neither to the group in which he was raised nor to the new group of a higher level.

Bangladeshis do not generally show ap-

preciation of, or encourage development of, abilities. Personal esteem bears little relationship to developing abilities and being successful in work, but rather is dependent on success in fitting into the group and carrying out one's role.



## CHAPTER 7

### SUCCESS

**American** — Americans encourage development of abilities and a rise in status due to successful use of abilities. Personal esteem is increased by success in work. Success is attained by personal effort.

**Bangladeshi** — Success is attained only by chance, fate, or manipulation of people or gods. Success is achieved at the expense of another. A Bangladeshi must know or have an "in" with the right person in order to get ahead. This is one reason why it's so vital to maintain good interpersonal relationships, particularly with those who are in a position to help one get ahead. Success is judged by results rather than by the effort involved. A person may have tried his hardest but if he doesn't produce he has failed. This leads to dishonesty and taking bribes in order to produce the necessary result at any cost, e.g. cheating on exams (the student is successful if he passes, whether he knows the material or not).

#### *View of life*

Americans operate generally on the mechanistic view of life, which says the individual can and should manipulate his environment by taking advantage of the laws of nature. Ability to manipulate environment is the basis for success.

Bangladeshis generally are guided by the personalistic view of life, which says there is no individual control over what happens; rather, the individual is manipulated by supernatural beings which must be placated. There can be no success apart from their favor. This has produced a fatalism commonly expressed by such phrases as "By the will of God." "it is written on my forehead." "I have good fortune" (Insha-Allah, (আমার কপালে লেখা আছে, আমার ভাগ্য ভাল) . This fatalism has resulted in traditionalism and resistance to change. Even when attempts are made by foreigners to prove the relationship between hard work and success or prosperity, Bangladeshis often are not impressed. They may agree to try some-

thing new but will readily abandon the innovation if they encounter difficulty.

Many people who have tried to work with Bangladeshis on improving their farming methods have had the experience of vividly demonstrating a better way of doing something only to have it rejected. Sometimes the reason is inability to see the future benefits, or the desire to maintain the status quo. Once a group of farmers refused to try the innovative methods because, they reasoned, it would produce more of a hardship on them when the crops failed. A common Bengali expression is, "if it was good enough for my ancestors, it's good enough for me" (আমার বাপ-দাদারা এটা করে এসেছে, আমি করব না কেন ?)

In some areas where the respect shown to forefathers verges on worship of them, innovation is almost impossible. Just as one person is coaxed to try a new idea, a relative will ask, "What is this you are about to do, something our ancestors never taught us to do! Who do you think you are?" And that will be the end of the new idea!

#### *Efficiency*

To the American, success is related to individual performance and accomplishment. Hard work, activity, and efficiency rate high on the American scale of values.

In Bangladesh, since success is related to personal contacts — who you know rather than personal accomplishment — inefficiency doesn't even enter into the thinking of most Bangladeshis. The essential thing is to maintain a good relationship with superiors, which has nothing to do with quality of work and output. It is not unusual for an office worker to leave his coat on his chair to represent him, and then go out for the day!

Bangladeshis may be influenced by the idea that the success attained or good received by one should be shared with others. This may account for the problems we encounter in loaning to and collecting from nationals. They expect to be able to borrow from us, and they often



show no concern about repayment. We have more than they, we don't need what we loaned, so why should they repay? This attitude may also account partially for the prevalence of beggars, and for the way in which a family member who could work will sit around and live off the other working members if he can't find a job that suits him. It may also account for the

way in which Bangladeshis prorate and even specify the amounts of contributions for a project on the basis of the status of the contributor, such as when the Chandraghona hospital staff staged a drama. They specified the amount to be given by various people as follows: missionaries, Taka 50; doctors, Taka 30; staff nurses, Taka 20; student nurses, Taka 3.



## CHAPTER 8

### ECONOMIC SECURITY

**American** — Economic security consists of money in the bank, stocks and bonds, property and insurance.

**Bangladeshi** — Economic security for the Bangladeshi is derived from possession of land and jewelry and now, for upper class people in populated areas, a bank balance is also a source of security. Jobs which provide a fixed income are considered desirable.

There is a distinct class consciousness which stems from the caste system background of the Bengali people. There are three main classes: upper, middle, and lower. Those in the *upper class* have enough money to do whatever they want, usually live in pukka houses, own property, may own a car, eat meat and/or fish twice daily, and may spend several lakhs of taka (several thousand dollars) for a wedding. The upper class consists mainly of large landowners, people in executive and high government positions, doctors, and big businessmen.

Those in the *middle class* have enough money to live fairly comfortably and educate their children well. They usually live in semi-pukka houses which they own, or in rented pukka quarters. They eat well, and, until the recent inflation, usually had meat and/or fish at least once daily. The middle class consists mainly of small businessmen, managers, teachers, small landowners, clerks, and nurses (low on the scale). These people may spend several thousand taka for a wedding. People of this class have a high degree of self-respect, are easily offended, and would die before they would beg for something. They mix occasionally with the upper class but never with the lower class, therefore they resent it when foreigners try to force mixing and equality. The middle class does not intermarry with the lower class nor form business contacts with them nor allow their children to play with lower class children.

People in the *lower class* live from day to day and spend most of their lives in debt, at least to the *dokan* (shop) where they buy their staple supplies, if not to a money lender. They may own their own

house and a small piece of land which barely sustains them. They usually live in small bamboo or mud houses and eat chiefly vegetables, with occasional dried or fresh fish. The lower class is made up of farmers, fishermen, day laborers, household servants, gardeners, peons, darwans (guards), drivers, ricksha and baby taxi drivers, etc.

It is not only an amount of money or income which distinguishes a middle class person from a lower class one. A poor struggling teacher is middle class, even though he may be poorer moneywise than a lower class person.

In villages the wealthiest people are expected to entertain visitors, make loans, give donations, grant reasonable favors to lower class people, act as go-between or judge in disputes. In return, the lower class people are expected to provide help for the upper class as needed.

#### *Social mobility*

"Keeping up with the Joneses" is common among Americans but seems to be prompted more by a spirit of competition than a sense of envy. There is little social mobility (climbing from one class to another) among the Bangladeshis. Usually a person remains in the class in which he is born. This is due largely to the fatalistic outlook on life and the resistance of the higher classes to the rise of a low class person. "Keeping up with the Joneses" is common among Bangladeshis, too, but there seems to be a strong element of jealousy and malice ( *হিসা, পরাধিকার* ) behind it. One Bangladeshi has said that envy and backbiting are the backbone of the nation, and he attributes this to the enervating climate which has produced laziness, resulting in poverty.

**Reciprocity** (as in repaying loans or debts)

In the United States, reciprocity is either contractual or falls into the area of social gift-giving. There are three kinds of reciprocity among Bangladeshis:

1. *Contractual reciprocity* — exact pay-



ment according to set terms. This usually involves large loans and is entered into only by the upper class. Ordinary people don't borrow large amounts. If they need a large amount of money, they either mortgage their land, or sell land or some possession.

2. *Quasi-contractual reciprocity* — the terms for repayment are explicit in the traditions of the culture and are understood automatically by those participating in the transaction. In Bangladesh, most borrowing is done on this system. Wealthy villagers and moneylenders lend according to an unwritten tradition, which includes the granting of an extension of time for repayment if necessary. In this system of reciprocity, security is required. If the borrower owns land, the land is automatically his security. If he has no land he must give gold or some other valuable possession as security. Sometimes, if the person has nothing for security, he gives a daughter in marriage.

The common practice of buying one's staple supplies on credit from a nearby dokan fits into this system of reciprocity. When a person pays off last month's debt he gets the next month's supplies. Theoretically, the shopkeeper often gives new supplies anyway in order to keep the person buying from him; thus, he can continue to profit by cheating on weights, giving inferior goods, and charging slightly higher prices. So, for most Bangladeshis, economic security depends not so much on a fixed income as on fixed friendships with sources of credit. One problem which shopkeepers face is that credit and even outright gifts must be given to members of his "in" group, with a resulting decrease in profits.

3. *Debt of gratitude* — this occurs when a person of higher status has done a special favor for one of lower status. The recipient feels he can't repay the debt fully, therefore he must show gratitude and awareness of his indebtedness by being willing to give services as necessary. He may also give occasional small gifts to the one to whom he is indebted. Thus full repayment is not expected — repayment is symbolic. Formerly it was probably considered that a child owes a debt of gratitude to his parents to the end of their lives. This attitude seems to be changing now with the breakdown of the joint family.

## BARGAINING

*American* — Fixed prices in shops are the rule in the USA and most Americans dislike bargaining. This probably comes from a fear of cheating or being cheated and of an ignorance of the bargaining process.

*Bangladeshi* — Apart from some fixed price shops in the cities, bargaining is the rule for buying and selling. The basis for bargaining is the assumption that the buyer and seller each have a hidden high and low point. The object of the game is to try to discover your opponent's high and low points without revealing your own. If a person is buying something from a hawker or a small sidewalk dokan, he will usually cut the seller's price in half for his first offer, and then work up to a happy medium. In the bazar, the seller's prices are usually closer to the right price, so the buyer cuts the price by only  $\frac{1}{3}$  or less for his initial offer.



## CHAPTER 9 GIFT GIVING

**American** — Gift giving is very common in America. It is practiced among friends and family to celebrate special occasions and as a return for hospitality. There is often a feeling of obligation when you have received a gift to give one in return.

**Bangladeshi** — Social gift giving is practiced chiefly among equals and may take the form of:

1. an উপহার — presentation given for some occasion such as a wedding or birthday (birthdays are celebrated only among middle and upper class people, and not necessarily by all in those classes). A gift given to a friend for his wedding or when he is leaving to go somewhere else is called a প্রীতি-উপহার. It is not a general custom to give a gift to someone who is leaving, but sometimes this is done as a remembrance ( আমার স্মৃতির জন্য তুমি রাখ ). It is more common for people to invite the one leaving for a meal. A gift given to a superior for a remembrance, e.g. a teacher who leaves a school or a manager who leaves an office, is called a ভক্তি-উপহার. It is also common to give a gift to a fellow employee who leaves his work.

An উপহার should be wrapped in wrapping paper or newspaper if wrapping paper is not available. It is not the Bengali custom to open gifts in front of the giver or other people. Bangladeshis find this very embarrassing as they feel it makes them look greedy. When other Bangladeshis are present there may also be the feeling that they will covet the thing, which is a bad omen and may bring misfortune, or that the recipient will have to share his gift with others if they admire it.

Don't be surprised if you receive no evidence of gratitude at all from the person to whom you have given a gift. In fact, he may not even acknowledge that he received the gift. Bangladeshis seldom use the word "thank you" and feel that the Westerner's indiscriminate use of "please" and "thank you" is superficial and insincere. This does not mean that

Bangladeshis are ungrateful. They express their gratitude by facial expression and tone of voice.

2. দেওয়া-নেওয়া — reciprocal giving of small gifts as tokens of friendship, unrelated to any special occasion. This often is food: a plate of rice cakes, a basket of mangoes, a dish of rice or semai pudding, fruit from some place visited. If a dish of food is received from someone, the plate is always returned with food from the recipient. When going to stay in someone's home, it's good to take a gift of fruit that is in season (if they aren't likely to have their own trees) or something that isn't available there, like cake or sandesh, and sweets for the children. An alternative to this, if you are staying for several days or longer, is to bring things occasionally from the market.

What is our relationship to this type of gift giving? If a middle or upper class person gives you this type of gift he probably is just trying to establish or maintain friendship; thus, the gift should be accepted and reciprocated as this signifies your acceptance of his friendship. Failure to reciprocate leaves you in the position of being indebted to the giver. There is no custom as to how soon you should reciprocate, although usually it is good to do it soon. This will probably depend somewhat on how close the friendship is, whether or not you have something suitable to give, and whether or not you feel the giver had an ulterior motive.

As to the extent to which you should reciprocate, it is not necessary to give as expensive a gift as you were given. The best thing is to give something which people here are not able to get, e.g. a pretty cake from your kitchen in exchange for a basket of mangoes. Sometimes Bangladeshis of other religions give us gifts on Christmas; however, this is unusual. The usual Bengali custom is for a person to give food gifts on his own religious holiday, so there is no need for us to give them gifts on their holidays. The foods usually sent as gifts on religious holidays are semai and rice puddings, and



various kinds of rice cakes (pita). These are sent in the morning, or served to anyone who comes to visit during the day. We can send plates of various kinds of our Christmas goodies as gifts to neighbors or friends on Christmas day.

Some of us have had the experience of admiring something belonging to a Bangladeshi and then having him give the thing to us, much to our surprise. This is not a general custom and it is not necessary for us always to give away something of ours which another person admires. As a general rule, it is better not to offer the item as it may embarrass the other person. If the person is a friend whom you want to please, and if you have more than one of the thing or don't need to keep it, it is all right to give it. If a person admires something and asks if you have others like it, that means he wants it; if you have more than one you can give it. If you think a person wants something of yours which you don't want to give away, it is acceptable to explain that "\_\_\_\_\_ gave it to me and it's special to me."

Most of us have had people say, "You must give me \_\_\_\_\_," which invariably arouses our ire. Among Bangladeshis it is common for close friends to say this. They may help themselves to anything they want from a friend's house, even if it is something the other person needs. They just say, "I am taking this," and take it. The attitude seems to be, "Anything I have is yours, and you can help yourself to it even without asking."

A Bangladeshi man, after reading a book which pleased him, said, "This book is wonderful. I will own it." Such a statement doesn't leave much room for refusal!

Perhaps when lower class people or

strangers say, "You must give," they are operating on the principle that our success should be shared with them.

Gifts given to you by a person of lower status may have one of four purposes:

1. maintenance of good interpersonal relationship
2. bribe
3. sincere expression of friendship
4. partial repayment of debt of gratitude

How are you to regard a gift given by a lower class person, which you feel is not intended as a token of friendship? If the gift is a bribe or if the giver wants something which you can't legitimately give, refuse the gift nicely. If granting the request involves breaking a rule, e.g. giving medicine at an off-time, and you feel the person can be reasoned with without taking advantage of you in the future, grant his request; but warn him that he is not to make such a request again. If someone brings a gift and doesn't ask for anything, but you feel a request will come in the future, accept the gift and reciprocate by serving tea or some similar thing so that you are not indebted for the future. Then you can deal with the future request on its own merits.

Someone gave one of our employees two chickens and asked him to do something he didn't feel he could do. So the employee invited the people involved to a meal of the two chickens, thus freeing himself of any indebtedness to the people.

The words দান, বর, আশীর্বাদ refer to a gift or favor from a person of higher status to one of lower status, in which there is no expectation of return, e.g. something given to a beggar or very poor person.



## CHAPTER 10

### HOSPITALITY

**American** — The American concept of hospitality consists of preplanned visits and invitations for meals or parties.

**Bangladeshi** — Hospitality is a vital part of maintaining social obligations (লোক-লোকিকতা) as seen by the way in which Bangladeshis give feasts and entertain without consideration of the cost. To a Bangladeshi, hospitality means serving an impromptu meal to unexpected guests and sacrificing to whatever extent is necessary to serve guests properly.

Bangladeshis do not expect guests who stay in their home to pay for their food or anything else connected with their stay. It is not unusual for a relative to move in for several months, or even for several years (e.g. while studying in college if his home is far away), and live as part of the family without ever paying any of his expenses.

In accordance with the Bengali custom, when a known person comes to your house, never ask, "What do you want?" You may ask an unknown person what he wants, using the expression, "Why have you come?" (আপনার কি চাই? কি মনে করে এসেছেন?) No matter who the visitor is, you should sit and visit with him, even if you are very busy. As suggested before, after visiting briefly you could explain that you have a very important work, then arrange another time for him to visit you. If a person comes to visit do not ask him when he is leaving. This is considered very impolite. If it is necessary for you to know for meal preparation, etc., ask someone else so that the visitor can't hear. When a person comes to visit, invite him to sit down immediately; when he says he is leaving, invite him to stay longer, or else invite him to come again.

#### *Serving a meal*

It is Bengali custom always to serve something to visitors; formerly the standard thing to serve was "pan," but now many serve tea (with milk and sugar) and biscuits or other light items of refreshment, usually on a small table with a tablecloth on it. We should always serve tea and biscuits or an acceptable equivalent — fruit in season, cold drink, etc. A

full glass of water should also be given with the refreshment. Usually they will eat the biscuit or other snack and then drink water before taking the tea.

When you invite Bangladeshis to your home for a Bengali meal, be careful to observe the following points:

1. The very *minimum* which you should serve is rice, dal, one *bhaji* (fried vegetables, fish), one meat dish — curry, korma, etc. In a middle or upper class Bengali home you would probably be served one vegetable *bhaji*, curried eggs, a fish *bhaji* or fish curry, a chicken curry or korma, a goat or other meat curry or korma, a chutney, and a sweet course. If you want to serve a biryani meal it should include the biryani, a *bhaji* (eggs, potatoes, etc.), a meat curry, usually included for the gravy because the rest of the meal is dry, salad, and sweet.

2. Even though you yourself may prefer to mix and eat all the elements of a Bengali meal together, Bangladeshis prefer their food served in courses, or at least they usually prefer to *eat* it in courses. For *non-Muslims* the courses should be served in this order:

- a. Rice, dal, and *bhaji*. If you are serving curried eggs also, they may be given with this course or as a second course with more dal.
- b. Rice and fish. If you are serving fish *bhaji*, more dal may be given with it. If you are serving fish curry, the dal is not necessary.
- c. Rice and meat. If you have several meat dishes, serve them one at a time, e.g. chicken curry first, then mutton curry or korma, etc. Offer chutney or some other tart relish with the meat course.
- d. Sweet. This may be *doi* with sugar, various Bengali sweets, etc. Fruit may be served, but this is less common.

For *Muslims* the order is reversed:

- a. Rice and meat
- b. Rice, dal, and *bhaji*
- c. Sweet



3. Be very careful to observe the religious restrictions of the people you invite. Muslims do not eat pork; Hindus and Buddhists do not eat beef; some Hindus and Buddhists will not eat any kind of animal flesh; and some Buddhists will not even eat eggs. If you are inviting people in the first two categories, it is always safe to serve chicken and usually mutton. People in the last two categories are probably so strict that they would not eat in your house anyway! Many Christians do not eat beef and/or pork, depending upon their background.

It is wise to check ahead of time as to what your guests do and do not eat ( *আপনি সব খান তো ?* ). This will avoid much embarrassment later. If your guests do not like or want to eat what you are serving, you may quickly fry an egg Bengali-style (with spices) or fix a potato bhaji to substitute for what they don't want. One way to get around the problem of likes and dislikes among your guests is to serve a variety of food buffet-style, if your guests are educated and progressive in their outlook. This might not go over so well in village situations where such an idea is unknown.

4. Most Bangladeshis eat with their fingers, so make some provision for your guests to wash their right hand both before and after the meal. You may often see Bangladeshis pour water from their glass into their plate and then wash their right hand in that water before the meal is served. This accomplishes two things: washing the hand and ensuring that the plate is clean. The most sanitary Bengali way is for the hostess to provide water which is passed from guest to guest to enable each person to wash his right hand before the meal.

After the meal the best thing to do is to carry water and a bowl from person to person and pour the water over the person's hand into the bowl. Or you may direct the guests to a place where you have provided water, soap, and a towel. You will sometimes see Bangladeshis pour water from their water glass over their hand into their plate after they have finished a meal. This is acceptable if no other means of handwashing is provided. Some middle and upper class Bangladeshis use silverware, usually a big spoon,

instead of eating with their hand. You should find out before the meal how they prefer to eat and provide the proper utensils.

5. Because it is extremely awkward to pass food when people are eating with their fingers, a bearer should serve the various courses right on to the guests' plates, or a close friend among the guests may be asked to serve. If the group is large, several people should be used to serve the food. It is not a good idea for us to try to serve the food ourselves because we don't understand how to give it — how much, what to give when, etc. When someone says "no" we don't give them any; but a Bangladeshi would understand how to interpret the "no." If the person says *না, আর পারছি না*, he doesn't want any more. If he says a weak *না* but makes no effort to prevent the one serving from giving more, he wants more.

6. Try to learn to eat with your fingers as the Bangladeshis do, mixing the food together, rolling it into a ball, and pushing it into the mouth with the thumb. Expect to be a source of great amusement to the Bangladeshis at first, though, until you learn to do it deftly. Use only your *right hand for eating* when eating with your fingers. Keep your left hand in your lap — it may be used only for holding your water glass when drinking. Right hand only should be used when chewing on bones or picking meat off bones.

7. Bangladeshis wash their mouths out after eating, so be sure they have a glass of water at the end of the meal. You may frequently hear a Bangladeshi burp during or after a meal. They do not consider this impolite.

8. Bangladeshis are very sensitive to class and religious differences among themselves. Thus you need to consider carefully what people you bring together in a group when inviting people to your house. For example, it probably would not be wise to invite one illiterate woman to a ladies' tea if all the other women are literate, and vice versa. Make sure your guests will mix well before inviting them.

Perhaps one of the hardest things for a



foreigner to adjust to in the area of hospitality and entertaining is that, no matter what you serve, there will be complaints: "the dal is too thin," "the meat has no flavor," "the tea doesn't have enough sugar." Steel yourself to the fact that your guests will criticize what you are serving them. Apparently a Bangladeshi takes no offense at having what he has served torn to shreds. In his mind the point is that he has shown hospitality and his guest is simply being honest in expressing an opinion. To the Westerner, though, this comes across as the height of ingratitude. You as the host or hostess have gone to considerable time, expense, and trouble, and it hurts to have your efforts maligned in this manner. Rather than fussing about it, or trying to change centuries of frank and blunt speech in this one area, accept that maybe this is where East and West will never meet.

### Visiting

When coming to a house to visit, get the attention of the people inside by calling, "Who is at home?" ( *বরে কে আছেন ?* ) or, using the name of the oldest child, call out, "Where is Benu's mother?" ( *বেহুর মা কোথায় ?* )

In the rainy season, if your feet are muddy when you arrive at a house, it is acceptable to ask for water to wash your feet. When the water is given, step on the flat stone or board near the entrance to the house and use your left hand to clean your feet as you pour the water over them. It is a good idea to remove your shoes before entering a village house with a mud floor unless told that you may keep them on, or unless you see other nationals inside the house with shoes on.

In village homes you will often be seated on a bamboo mat on the floor. Try not to step on the mat unless you have to in order to take your seat. When sitting on the floor, men usually sit cross-legged and the women sit with their legs under them and to one side.

Many Bangladeshis are offended by our attitude of hurry, especially in regard to visiting. The concept of "dropping in for 15 minutes" is unknown to them; when they visit friends, they frequently go in time to spend half a day, including a meal time, with them. So when you visit Bangladeshis plan enough time so that

you can spend at least one hour with them and don't seem to be rushing off.

You will usually always be served a snack when visiting in a Bengali home. Often you will be left alone while the snack is being prepared, and perhaps also while you are eating. Usually the people of the house do not eat with their guests, although they may in middle and upper class homes. When visiting in a poor home don't deny the people of the house the right to give you food. That is part of their fulfillment of social obligations and is vital for maintaining their self-esteem. Accept whatever they give you, but it is acceptable when you leave to secretly give the children of the house money to buy sweets.

When you are invited for a meal and are given more food than you can eat, ask for another plate and remove what you do not expect to eat to the clean plate — before you start eating, of course. Explain that you can't eat that much. If you are served something which you don't want to eat at all, you may try refusing politely. Be sensitive to the situation, however, and if you feel the host may be offended, try to eat a small amount. If it is something which will make you sick, explain that. If you finish all the food on your plate, your hostess will think you didn't get enough. If you leave a small amount they will feel you are satisfied. After eating it is polite to say, "I've given you much trouble" ( *আপনাকে কষ্ট দিলাম* ) to which their reply will be, "Oh, no, you haven't given me any trouble" ( *না, কষ্ট দেন নাই* ).

Bangladeshis customarily set a special day for serving tea and sweets to people shortly after a big event has occurred, e.g., the birth of a baby, moving into a new house, passing a major exam, etc. This is also observed at certain other times which are special to particular religious groups, e.g., the day a baby is named, which may also be the day its head is first shaved; the day a baby eats its first rice; the day of *sraddha* following a Hindu person's death, etc. It is good to take a gift for the baby on the first visit after its birth. It is customary to visit people on their special holidays. Thus, Bangladeshis expect to be able to visit us on Christmas, and, to a lesser extent, on New Year's Day and Easter.



### *Receiving and responding to invitations*

The advance notice (lead time) for an American is usually one week or more. The person sending the invitation expects it to be answered promptly with either an acceptance or a regretful apology for being unable to attend. Frequently "RSVP" is written right on the invitation. Having accepted the invitation, the person will mark it on his calendar and, unless prevented by unusual circumstances, will make every effort to attend.

In Bangladesh, the lead time for invitations for food is one to two days; that is, invitations are made on the very day for which they are intended or on the day before. An invitation given to a Bangladeshi far in advance is likely to be forgotten. Invitations are always verbal. Even if a written invitation is sent it must be followed by a verbal invitation. It is customary for the person doing the inviting, or someone from his family, to go in person to those whom he is inviting. If the time for a party or function is specified as between two times (e.g. 4:00-7:00 P.M.) it is understood that the person receiving the invitation can come any time within that time period. Food is served at intervals to the group there at that particular time. It is expected that guests will leave shortly after eating, about 10 or 15 minutes later. This usually applies to any meal invitation.

Verbal invitations are usually always accepted unless the person invited has an obvious reason not to accept. If he isn't sure whether he will go or doesn't intend to go but doesn't want to hurt the feelings of the one giving the invitation, he may say, "I will try" ( *আচ্ছা, চেষ্টা করব, খুব চেষ্টা করব* ) or "I can't exactly say" ( *ঠিক বলতে পারি না* ). If the person says "I will go" ( *যাব* ) he is expected to show up and will be criticized for not keeping his word if he doesn't. If the person invited hesitates to answer, the one inviting will press for an answer. Silence implies consent. If a person receives a written invitation with no verbal follow-up, he understands that it's only a formality and he probably will not go.

We occasionally face the problem of receiving an invitation for a meal on that very day at a time when we are unable to go due to a prior engagement. In some cases the people inviting have already killed the chicken or begun to prepare the food, which means great inconvenience and waste if we refuse the invitation. Our Bangladeshi informants were not able to give an answer as to what we should do in that situation. They themselves would accept the invitation and work it into their schedule, even if it meant eating supper twice.



## CHAPTER 11

### TIME

**American** — Americans are time-oriented to an extreme, obsessed with time, as some say. They specify everything in terms of time: "two years ago;" "I'll be there in ten minutes;" "I was in the Army 4½ years."

**Bangladeshi** — Bangladeshis are event-oriented. If they enjoy the event, the time factors do not enter their thinking. They may come several hours early and sit for hours while the event is occurring without concern as to when it will end. Events start when things are ready and everyone is there, and a Bangladeshi is not concerned about specifying time exactly. Thus, the following expressions are common: "Come toward late afternoon" ( বিকালের দিকে এসো ), "I will come by five o'clock" ( ৫ টার মধ্যে আসব ); "I will go before evening" ( সন্ধ্যার আগে যাব ) .

#### *Punctuality*

Punctuality is of prime value to the American. Lack of punctuality indicates either irresponsibility or the desire to be insulting. Deadlines and appointments are considered a serious matter; failure to meet them may result in penalties.

Most Bangladesh village people have only a general idea of time. They regulate their lives by the sun and specify relative times by pointing to the position of the sun in the sky. They have no fixed daily schedule, and eat whenever convenient. The expression, "Bangladeshis have no right time or wrong time" ( বাংলাদেশীদের সময়-অসময় নাই ) describes the situation well. They will never turn a person away because it is the wrong time.

Lateness on the informal level is readily excused. "Relatives came, I couldn't get away" is understood by everyone. However, if a person is *very* late he is considered irresponsible — "He doesn't keep his word" ( তার কথা রাখে না ) .

For formal appointments people are usually on time if the appointment is important to them. Employees usually get to work on time and students get to school on time. In school, fines are imposed for

lateness; in work situations, warnings are given and an employee's wages may be cut for repeated tardiness. Employees are not dismissed for repeated lateness. Penalties are not usually imposed for failure to meet deadlines or to keep appointments, but such failure does result in loss of respect. Important people often come late to functions; perhaps this builds up their egos.

Even though you arrange ahead of time with a Bangladeshi woman that you will come at a certain time to take her somewhere, don't expect her to be ready when you arrive. She will probably wait until she sees you before she begins to get ready, so go a little early.

#### *Time orientation*

Americans are oriented toward the future, although for them the future is limited to the foreseeable future. Long-term planning means planning for the next five or ten years. Americans look forward to the future, thus they welcome new ideas and changes.

Bangladeshis are oriented toward the past: their past is their life. What they are now doesn't matter. They glory in what they were in the past. It is not unusual for a Bangladeshi to say, "This is what my ancestors did for a thousand years; should I be different from them?" The future enters very little into the thinking of Bangladeshis. They don't think more than a few days ahead; anything beyond that is future and they are likely to forget it, thus the reason for the shortness of lead time for invitations. To some extent Bangladeshis consider it presumptuous to talk about the future, probably due to the fatalism of their religions. Promises of future gain are not very important to Bangladeshis; only present things and immediate gifts have reality. This is seen in the Bangladeshi preference for keeping their wealth in gold rather than putting money in the bank where it could gain interest. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" is a guiding principle.



### *Duration of time*

The American concept of the duration of time is related to:

1. a sense of urgency
2. doing one thing at a time
3. activity (we must always be doing something; sitting still or meditating is a waste of time)
4. variety (we delight in variety; lack of it produces boredom)

The Bangladeshi concept of the duration of time is related to:

1. lack of a sense of urgency. Occasionally there is urgency, and this results in the person being on time. Urgency is provided by respect for the other person (usually because he is someone who can help you get ahead) and the opportunity for personal gain.
2. many irons in the fire, with the result that often nothing gets done.
3. value in periods of inactivity for thinking and for meditation as a religious activity.
4. variety and change considered unnecessary, even undesirable. There is little variety in Bengali meals from day to day, and women wear pretty much the same dress and hairstyle, although among educated people it is becoming more common to desire variety in these things.

Bangladeshis tend to live very much by tradition and do not easily accept new people, things, and ideas. This is evident when a person leaves a position. Those subordinate to him do not readily accept his successor, for many months praising the way the former person did things and complaining about the way the new person does them.

### *Setting time limits*

Americans set time limits on meetings. Any unfinished business is referred to committees or subcommittees for further consideration.

The Bangladeshis' lack of concern for saving time shows up in their attitude toward committees and subcommittees. They don't like the idea of relegating business to a smaller group of people. They want to see things discussed fully in

a general meeting of all those involved, no matter how long this may take. Decisions are to be made by all after full discussion. They want to know everything about the matter, and they encourage everyone to express his opinion. Like the Greeks, the Bangladeshis consider referring a matter to a committee an attempt to "pull the wool over their eyes."

### *Implications of the differences in time orientation*

To the person from the Indian subcontinent, a mark of spirituality is a calm and quiet way of life. A spiritual man knows how to wait, indefinitely if need be. He doesn't run in all directions like a rubber band ready to snap. The Western concept of rush-rush-rush, work-work-work repels most Asians.

Often before important decisions are to be made the Asian will spend time — a day or two or more — just sitting. He may be thinking, praying, or meditating. To the Westerner, anything more than a reasonable prayer session would be considered a "waste of time." To one from the Indian culture, however, this quiet time is necessary to eliminate extraneous thoughts, to focus his whole attention on the matter at hand and on maintaining harmony with the people involved.

This area of time and the differences in approach to time between Westerners and Easterners is one of the hardest problems to handle. What to the Westerner is urgency comes across to the Easterner as frenzy. What to the Easterner is soul-nourishing calm comes across to the Westerner as laziness. Perhaps Rudyard Kipling summed it up best in his classic:

"Now it is not wise for the Christian's health

To hustle the Aryan brown

For the Christian riles

And the Aryan smiles

And it weareth the Christian down.

And the end of it all is a tombstone white

With the name of the late deceased

And an epitaph drear

'A fool lies here

Who tried to hustle the East.'

— from "the Naulakha"



## CHAPTER 12

### SPACE

**American** — Americans tend to avoid bodily contact with others, even in a crowded place. They "hold themselves in" to avoid touching another person. They expect to stand in an orderly line awaiting their turn at a counter or when buying tickets, etc.

**Bangladeshi** — Within the same sex Bangladeshis tend to crowd together, but a decent person makes every effort to avoid touching someone of the opposite sex. On trains and buses it is common to see a girl or woman sit almost on top of her neighbor even when there is lots of space available. There is little concept of standing in line for something. Everyone crowds to the ticket window, registration desk, etc.

#### *Integrating a new person into available space*

In America, when a new person is added in an office the other workers will voluntarily make the necessary adjustments to divide the total space equally, even though this may mean moving away from favorite positions or views. If this adjustment is not made, the boss knows the new person has not been integrated into the group.

When a new person is added to an office in Bangladesh, the people already occupying that office try not to move to let the new one in. If they have to move, they do so grudgingly with an attitude of irritation and then relinquish the smallest amount of space possible. At first they won't talk to the newcomer but gradually the ice thaws and eventually a close friendship may develop with the newcomer.

#### *Space used during conversation*

For ordinary conversation the conventional distance of two to five feet is usual for Americans; two to three feet if the subject is personal and four to five feet if it is nonpersonal.

Conversational distance for Bangladeshis within the same sex seems to be about the same as for Americans. However, a man and woman conversing

together stand a little further apart. A decent man never stands close to or puts his hand on a girl. It used to be a custom for people to stand to talk with an older person or someone who deserves respect. This is less commonly observed now.

#### *Direction*

Americans place little or no emphasis on direction. Their chief concerns would be convenience, safety, and perhaps esthetics.

Direction is particularly significant to Bangladeshi Muslims. Their mosques are oriented toward Mecca; they don't lie with their feet toward Mecca or bury people with their feet toward Mecca. Certain other directional orientations are generally observed by Bangladeshis:

1. They always try to build their houses facing south or east because of the light and breeze factors.
2. Houses are built as far from a bamboo grove as possible, as the grove is believed to give off bad air. On the other hand, people try to build close to a nim tree if possible because it is thought to be good for the health.
3. They don't lie with their head toward the north because a cold wind blows from that direction in the winter. Thus it isn't good for the health.
4. They do not lie down in such a way that their feet would be pointing toward someone's head. This is necessary to know if you are sleeping in a Bengali home or staying with Bangladeshis at camp, etc.
5. A wife's place is at her husband's left side, indicating inferiority.

A young couple refused to accept a snapshot of themselves because in posing for it the wife had inadvertently sat on her husband's right side.

#### *Practical considerations for foreigners to observe*

Foreigners, and perhaps especially Americans, are apt to be rather casual in



regard to what they touch or how they touch it, and thereby unwittingly cause offense to the Bangladeshi. The following points should be carefully observed:

1. Use the right hand when giving or receiving anything, as the left hand is considered dirty. Some Bangladeshis will place their left hand on their right forearm as a sign of respect when handing anything to you or taking anything from you.
2. It is considered very impolite to sit with the soles of your feet pointing toward another person, whether you are sitting on the floor or on a chair. Men should especially avoid sitting with one ankle placed on the opposite knee. It is considered rude for a man to put his feet up on his desk or chair. Bangladeshi women usually don't sit with one leg crossed over the other knee as this is considered the way boys sit, and it causes the foot to be pointed out.
3. Treat the Bible respectfully. Don't put it near your feet or on the floor. Men should avoid sitting with one ankle balanced on the other knee and the Bible placed on the knee.
4. When Bangladeshis accidentally touch another person's foot, they give a polite hand gesture as a sign of apology. It is sufficient for us if we say, "Excuse me" ( ক্ষমা করবেন ) when we touch a person's foot. Be very careful, however, to avoid touching another person's foot.
5. Many Bangladeshis, when walking in front of someone or between two people in a narrow place, put their right hand out in front of them and bend over. It is sufficient for us to say, "I'm passing between you" ( মধ্য দিয়ে যাই ), or some similar expression, in asking permission to walk between two people; although in some situations, as with the village people, it is good to extend the right hand also.

### *Privacy*

Privacy is an essential American value. Americans derive security from privacy. They have their own bedrooms, drawers, mail, and even conversations are considered private affairs. Violation of privacy is a serious offense.

Bangladeshis derive security from togetherness, and the Western concept of privacy is incomprehensible to most Bangladeshis. In most lower class homes the whole family lives in one room while the children are small. When the children get older, boys and girls sleep in separate rooms but within the sexes there is togetherness. Often an only girl sleeps with her mother so that she doesn't have to be alone. Those who sleep together share the same bedding, and family members usually have everything in common. This has sometimes caused problems at our camps because children from the same family usually don't have separate bedding.

Conversations are not considered private; it's quite all right to listen to other people's conversations. If the conversation is actually intended to be private, the parties talking will change the subject or stop completely when another person joins them and usually will begin to talk to the newcomer. In that situation the newcomer often realizes that he has intruded and will move away. Children are almost always sent away when adults are talking in a serious conversation.

Americans resent other people's prying into their business and giving unsolicited advice. Among Bangladeshis, probably because of the close relationship which they tend to develop with one another, it is quite acceptable for one person to interfere in another's business and tell him what to do and how to do it. In fact, a Bangladeshi expects that if another person sees him doing something wrong he will correct him, particularly if the other person is older or in a superior position. In Bangladesh every man is his brother's keeper. Frequently a young Bangladeshi will take a problem, e.g. concerning his work, to an older Bangladeshi who has nothing to do with his work rather than to his employer, perhaps hoping that the older person will act as go-between. Often the Bangladeshi's desire to know what's going on or to get involved in a problem stems from a sincere interest and desire to help, not from just being nosy.

To a Bangladeshi it is not out of order to ask personal questions, so you can expect to be asked how much money you make per month, how much rent you pay, whether or not you are married, and, if



not, why not, etc. If a Bangladeshi feels the other person is prying from a wrong motive or for some reason doesn't want to answer a question, he gives an indirect answer. Thus, "Why did you come?" might be answered, "I just came" (এমনি এসেছি) or "I have a need" (একটু দরকার ছিল). "What is your salary?" could be answered "Enough to feed and clothe myself" (খাওয়া-পরা যেন চলে) . "How

much rent do you pay?" can be answered, "I don't pay it myself. It is paid by the Mission (or the company)," or you can simply say that the treasurer pays the rent.

Bodily functions, which to us are private and not subjects for conversation, are considered normal, natural parts of life here, so you may hear them discussed just as we would talk about the weather.



## CHAPTER 13

### GENERAL INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Bangladeshis generally feel a real closeness to each other and a sense of dependence on each other. They are quick to make the acquaintance of a newcomer and to try to find out all about him. Fellow passengers on a train or bus, previously unknown to each other, may enjoy each other's company to the extent that the first one to get off will take the other with him to his house, feed him, and insist that he stay for awhile. This is especially true if the two people are from the same district; there is a real fellow feeling among people of the same district, expressed by the term *দেশী* which they use in addressing each other.

A young man who himself has always lived in Chittagong, but his father's family home ( *বাড়ী* ) is Barisal, was sent to Dacca for several months to study. On his first Sunday in church after he returned home he was immediately greeted warmly by all the other Barisali men there, using the term *দেশী*.

In offices special favors are granted to people who are from the same district as the men in charge of the office. Their work will be finished quickly, while other people might have to return several times and wait for days before their work is accomplished.

Very soon after a new acquaintance is made, that person is made a part of the family by assigning him a relationship term, such as older brother, older sister, aunt, uncle, etc. The term to be used depends on the ages of the people involved, how they are known to each other, and what relationship term is used by another member of the family. Thus people of the same generation will use terms for "brother" or "sister", a person of one's parent's generation will be "aunt" or "uncle", etc.

A child will call an older woman "aunt" ( *পিসিমা, মাসীমা*, ) depending on whether the woman is known chiefly to his father or his mother. If a young mother addresses an older woman as "aunt," her child must address that same woman as "grandmother." If one sister

addresses another woman as "aunt," another sister must address her as "aunt" also. When two Bangladeshis meet they establish their relationship quite quickly. If it is not immediately apparent what the relationship should be, the younger person usually asks the older one, "What shall I call you?"

Bangladeshis seldom use a person's name in addressing or referring to him. Instead they use the appropriate relationship term, or, if the person has children, they refer to him by the name of one of his children, usually the oldest, e.g. "Benu's mother," "Manik's father," etc. When a man's name is used, he may be addressed or referred to by attaching a term of respect to his name: Babu for Hindu or Buddhist, Meah for Muslim, or Sahib for an influential Muslim or foreigner. For an older woman or woman of the same age who has no children, "didi" or "di" can be attached to her name for non-Muslims and "bibi" for Muslims. If she is married she may be referred to as her husband's wife ( *বৌ* ) e.g. "Manik's wife." A younger woman or child can be called by name.

It is good to form the habit of addressing or referring to people by attaching one of the respectful terms mentioned above to the end of the name: Khoka Babu, Mostaque Meah, Kiron Didi, Hashidi, etc.

Each relationship term signifies a particular role and type of behavior, so the relationship term assigned a person identifies his role in relation to those who call him that. For example, "older brother's wife" ( *বৌদি, ভাবী* ) signifies a free, easy bantering relationship. If a man calls a woman *বৌদি* he can tease her and she can joke with him. It is the custom for younger brothers' wives, however, to honor their husband's elder brother, and they usually do not even go into the presence of their husband's older brothers except to serve them. "Sister" ( *দিদি, আপা* ) signifies a more dignified relationship. *দিদি* advises, corrects, and helps those who call her that, and they treat her with respect.



Any of the terms for aunt or uncle signify a respectful relationship. The aunt or uncle is expected to give correction, discipline, and help as needed.

A person who has been put out of his family, e.g. a convert, may choose someone in his new society to take the place of his mother and father, and he will call them "mother" and "father." They are then expected to fulfill those roles, treating the convert as a son or daughter, advising, correcting, making marriage arrangements, financing the marriage, etc.

As guardian ("mother") of a teen-age girl convert, a missionary lady had to finance the girl's wedding and perform all the responsibilities of the girl's mother in relation to the wedding. A convert boy took a Bangladeshi Christian lady as his mother, then later, when he arranged employment for himself, another Bangladeshi rebuked him for having done this on his own without consulting with his "mother."

Since it is the Bengali custom to make acquaintances a part of the family by addressing them with a relationship term, you will find that Bangladeshis who have accepted you as one of themselves will use a relationship term in addressing you rather than using your name. When a foreigner is assigned a relationship term by Bangladeshis, it indicates that he is expected to fulfill the role signified by that term. If he rejects the role, he remains an outsider and may be regarded with suspicion. As a foreigner learns the Bengali language and gets to know the people, a relationship of trust and acceptance will develop and the use of kinship terms will come automatically. It is better to let this develop naturally rather than trying to force it on the Bangladeshis. The foreigner should pay attention to the way relationship terms are used and learn to use them correctly himself. If you can learn to use these terms properly, it will draw you closer to the Bangladeshi people.

When addressing a woman close to your age or a little older, it is polite to call her "didi." If she is much older, call her "mashi" or, in villages, "ma" is acceptable. Older men may be addressed as "baba" or "bura." Men may address non-Muslim men their own age or a little

older as "dada." Small boys may be called "khoka" and small girls, "khuki." Many Bangladeshi Christians have formed the habit of using the English words "aunt," "uncle," "sister," and "brother" in addressing foreigners. Do not be surprised when Bangladeshi children call you "Aunt" or "Uncle" as they are taught not to call you by name. Also, foreign children should be taught to address nationals respectfully, either by using the appropriate relationship term or using the national's name with a term of respect, e.g. Santosh Babu, Sabitridi, etc. Children should never call a Bangladeshi national adult simply by his name.

The term "brother" (ভাই) is used in many different ways, which is sometimes confusing to foreigners. It may mean one's own brother, one's cousin-brother, another person from the same district (দেশের ভাই), or another person of the same religion as with the Muslim concept of ভাই-ভাই. Girls and women also use the word in addressing their female friends. In that case it means "friend."

An older person can criticize and reprimand any younger person, but usually does it privately and with the usual sugar-coating. It is common to hear an older person preface a remark to a younger person with, "I am saying this as your mashima (aunt)," and then follow this with advice or rebuke.

It is Bengali custom, although dying out now among educated people, for a younger person to "pronam" his parents and other older relatives, or any older person to whom he should show respect. In some cases the pronam is merely for showing respect, and consists of touching the older person's feet with the right hand followed by the hand motion used to "salam" a person. When a person pronams you, your response should be to touch the person's head with your right hand. You may also say, "Enough" (থাক, হতো). In some cases the pronam carries a deeper connotation, almost approaching worship, as when a Hindu wife pronams her husband or a Hindu wife spiritual leader. In these cases the person usually prostrates himself with his head touching the other person's feet. This is sometimes referred to as "taking the dust" of the other person's feet on your head.



Probably because of the close relationship which Bangladeshis feel with each other, refusing to do a favor for someone is unthinkable. They often do things for other people at great sacrifice and inconvenience to themselves. A common favor asked is for a person going somewhere to request a friend to go along with him so he won't have to go alone. Unless it is impossible the friend will usually grant this request. Also, a Bangladeshi feels that he can't turn down a request which is for the good of society. Americans are much more apt to turn down a request if they have something else to do, or if they feel the request is unreasonable, or the person making the request doesn't deserve the favor. We tend to feel it is wrong to help people who could help themselves.

### *Man-woman relationships*

Among Bangladeshis a person's strongest friendships are with those of his own sex. Even in marriage there is usually little companionship between husband and wife. Men spend much time in tea shops with their friends, and women socialize with the other village women at the well or in house-to-house visiting.

Throughout 95% of the Indian subcontinent, men and women are segregated in their social contacts. If a husband and wife attend the same function they are rarely in the same room together. If a man and woman who know each other happen to meet on the street, they avert their eyes and walk past one another. A man even pretends not to see his own mother in the street. This behavior, which is curious to the Western mind, has its roots in the social order which for centuries has dictated that women have absolutely no part in male social life. In fact, a man feels very ashamed to see a female of his acquaintance on the streets, right out there in public where all manner of strangers can look at her. By not acknowledging her presence, he sublimates his shame and averts the suspicion of familiarity.

Physical contact, such as hand-holding, is acceptable between members of the same sex. It indicates comradeship and usually has no evil connotation. However, such physical contact between members of the opposite sex is considered very bad, almost equal to an illicit

sexual relationship. When boys and girls reach puberty they are kept separate or are well-chaperoned if together. Even the exchange of letters between a boy and girl is considered indecent unless the letters are read by the girl's guardian. Theoretically, free mixing of the sexes is not allowed; however, the number of illegitimate pregnancies which occur indicate that, in spite of the custom, some kind of mixing does take place!

Self-control is not of significant value in Bengali culture, as seen in the unrestrained way in which Bangladeshis express anger and grief, and in the fact that boys are not taught to control their sexual urges, nor girls to resist male approaches. Will power must be provided by other people rather than by personal inhibition. It is considered impossible for a man to suppress his sexual urges when alone with a woman, and women are considered unable to resist men because they are weak and frail. Thus outside safeguards and protective measures are necessary, e.g. seclusion of women, separate boys' and girls' schools, separate men's and women's compartments on trains, observing purdah. Those women you see wearing the burkah, the long black or white covering that engulfs them from head to foot, are Muslim women who are observing purdah, "staying behind the curtain." They are allowed to go out on the street as long as they are covered from head to toe. You will find, when you go visiting in homes where the women are "keeping purdah," that you may never see the women in the home. There are usually two areas in the home, one for men and one for women. Foreign ladies may be invited back into the women's quarters.

Because of the lack of stress by Bangladeshis on self-control, and the idea that when a girl reaches puberty she won't be able to control her sexual desire or resist a man's advances, girls are often married at an early age. Among lower class people it is still quite common to arrange marriages for girls soon after they reach puberty, thus avoiding the potential problems of illegitimate pregnancy or a bad reputation for the girl because of undue familiarity with a boy. One slight misstep on the part of a girl, such as a smile directed toward a boy at the wrong time



and place, or an intercepted love letter, or any such suspicious behavior, may ruin a girl's reputation.

At camp one year two teen-age girls were accused by some of the other campers of waving at some boys walking on the road on the other side of the lake. One girl's mother was very upset when she heard about this because of what it might do to her daughter's reputation and marriage prospects. Another teen-age girl was arranging secret meetings with boys at church and generally behaving indiscreetly. When her father found out about this he immediately arranged her marriage so that there would be no further opportunity for such misbehavior.

Respectable Bangladeshi women are very discreet and go out of their way to avoid the appearance of flirting or showing undue interest in a man. They do not look at, and certainly do not smile at, an unknown man. When walking on the street and meeting an oncoming man, they lower their eyes as commanded for Muslim women in the Koran. A woman may acquire a bad reputation simply from being in a situation where something *could* have happened, whether it did or not.

Bangladesh is a man's country. Women's place is definitely one of subjection to men; however, women who accept their position and live up to the role expected of them are treated with respect. A quote from a Pakistani woman in a leading secular magazine will help to clarify this subject:

"In Pakistan men still are, as you call it, 'the boss.' And these men prefer to guard their women from the covetous eyes of the world. You may have the idea that the Pakistani woman leads a frightful life. Shrouded in anonymity, subservient, silent, humble. Please allow me to correct that impression. In public she appears to be all these things. But in the home she is revered. The veil she wears is both her prison and her pedestal. Because she works hard to please only her family, her husband does everything within his emotional and economic power to please her. He has pride in her. She is good because she is a woman and the bearer of his children. And she is precious because she is all his. Hers is, in its way, a much

easier life than that of the Western woman. Her position is crystal clear. Her husband is the boss, but in a very real spiritual way (the spirit is almost tangible in our lands) she rules."

Proper Bangladeshi women are extremely modest in the presence of men. Missionary women should be the same in their relationship both to national men and missionary men. As a general rule missionary women should not engage in idle social conversation with national men, or missionary men with national women, after church services or in other public places. This is not intended to eliminate Christian fellowship — there is a time and place for that.

Single women missionaries especially need to be aware of the importance of behaving discreetly in their relationship with both Bangladeshi and foreign men. Many Bangladeshis can't conceive of the idea of a woman remaining unmarried and living a pure life, mainly because of two factors: support and sexual desire.

It is good for us to be aware of the attitudes and problems mentioned in this section because of its implications as we work with the people here, for example the problems of young widows, or women whose husbands have left them, or older unmarried girls.

The following traits are considered desirable feminine characteristics and gain respect for a woman:

- submissiveness
- modesty
- readiness to serve others
- slow, graceful gait with short steps
- subdued speech and laughter

It is considered immodest by Bangladeshis for women to whistle. In fact, some groups believe that whistling calls up evil spirits so they do not appreciate anyone whistling. Sometimes foreign women wonder why they are not treated with the same kind of respect that a Bangladeshi woman is. Looking at the above list, one can see that most foreign women do not conform to the description of the respected Bangladeshi woman, and therefore cannot be respected as such.

A missionary wife wearing a sari entered a group of Bangladeshi ladies to whom she was not well-known. Immediately a ripple of approval went through



the group of ladies, with this remark, "Why, she looks just like a Bangladeshi wife" (বোঁ). This was not said because of her blonde, blue-eyed appearance, but because she presented the picture described in the list above.

Modesty in wearing the sari consists in having the ankles covered, keeping the "tail" the right length (approximately hip length is always acceptable), not leaving too much of the midriff exposed, and not wearing the sari so tight that it reveals the outline of the body. Of course, the younger generation now considers this old-fashioned and has slightly different styles, particularly relating to the tail length and amount of midriff exposed. Bangles are part of a woman's dress unless she is a widow. Most older women and some college girls wear the tail of their sari pulled around their right shoulder when they are out in public. Married women usually cover their head with the sari in public.

This brings up the issue of what foreign women ought to wear. In many instances the sari is the proper choice. Certainly this is true for visiting in homes, attending Bengali weddings and functions, and for going to church or teaching classes. Wearing a sari to a religious service solves the problem of how to cover the head at the appropriate times. The foreigner must be sure, however, that she is wearing the sari properly and especially that it is long enough to cover her ankles.

Within the confines of her home a lady is probably free to wear her own country's styles. But there are always people watching, so even in the home modesty must be the rule. One respected Bangladeshi pastor advised that there is *never* a

time when it is proper for a lady to wear slacks. Others perhaps would modify that, allowing for a pant suit outfit, provided the top is a long tunic style. Remember the pant suit was a national dress of the Indian subcontinent long before the style ever hit the West. In Bangladesh it is most often seen only on school girls and college girls. Bangladeshis are often chagrined to see mature women wearing this outfit.

There may be situations, however, when the shalvar/chemise (pant suit) is the proper dress. Perhaps for modesty's sake in riding a bicycle, traveling on a variety of conveyances, bending over patients, etc. the pants and a long top ought to be worn. In choosing a top keep in mind that to the Bangladeshi the slacks part of the outfit is considered as underpants. Therefore, the seat and the crotch must be completely covered by a top or the lady wearing this is indecent. We once tried to work out a tunic top code by saying the top ought to be as long as the length of your longest finger when your hands are held to your sides. We found that people have longer or shorter fingers, so that measurement didn't work. Suffice it to say, your top must cover your bottom!

Many ladies have found that long dresses or skirts, the "maxi" length, are the best answer to the wardrobe problem here. These can be made in attractive styles and yet maintain modesty. In choosing materials, be careful as to how much can be seen through the cloth. The material needs to be heavy enough or a full petticoat worn, along with proper undergarments, so that the body form is not outlined in the tropical sun.



## CHAPTER 14 MARRIAGE

In most cases marriages are arranged by the guardians of the parties to be married. Often the approval of the boy is sought, and sometimes of the girl. Often the boy and girl do not know each other and have had no previous contact, although now, among educated young people, it is becoming common for the young people themselves to decide whom they want to marry and then tell their parents so the parents can go through the formality of making the arrangements. In these cases the marriage is usually based on infatuation and there is a degree of romantic love manifest in the relationship. In ordinary Bengali marriages it is expected that love will develop after marriage, and it often does, although it doesn't correspond to the Western idea of romantic love. It is more a mutual respect based on the husband's fulfilling his role of providing for and protecting his family, and the wife's fulfilling her role of revering and honoring her husband by meeting his needs and being a good mother to his children. In the lower class society, marriage is often looked upon chiefly as a matter of convenience and little love is manifest.

Quoting again from the magazine article written by a Pakistani woman:

"There is this to say about marriage: when a man and woman wed from free choice they expect far more from one another in every way than a couple expects in an arranged marriage. When the marriage is arranged the couple is completely without expectations. Whatever they receive in the way of tenderness or beauty is a wonderful bonus."

Regardless of the presence or absence of love between husband and wife, they do not display affection or have physical contact in public. Any display of affection between husband and wife is a private matter related to sexual intercourse, and they do not engage in it in the presence of their children or other family members. Of course, in the close quarters in which many families live, nothing is really private. A wife may pronam her husband on certain occasions to show

respect, such as at their first meeting after being separated for a long time, but she will never kiss him outside their bedroom. The idea is, "Kissing is for children, for the bedroom, and for mad foreigners in the movies."

Wives never call their husbands by name. They usually use "ogo" (ওগো) or "suncho" (সুনছো) in addressing their husbands and refer to them as their child's father. To Hindus it is a grave sin for a wife to utter her husband's name. Husbands never refer to their wives as "mother" or "mommy" and vice versa. To the Bangladeshi this is an indication of incest since the term you use in addressing a person signifies your relationship with him. If a man calls a woman "mother" he cannot have sexual relations with her.

It was discovered that a teen-age boy and girl had had illicit relations. As punishment the boy was made to pronam the girl and call her "mother", which meant that he could never have such a relationship with her in the future.

In Bangladesh, marriage is very much a family affair. It is considered not just the uniting of a man and woman but the uniting of two families. Therefore, there is a great deal more to be taken into account when arranging a marriage than just the compatibility of the couple. The following factors are considered:

1. religion
2. class, status, standard of living
3. family background (caste, if Hindu) (বংশ) — a boy may be educated, but if his parents are uneducated this may be a hindrance to a marriage with an educated girl. Many non-Barisali Bangladeshis are hesitant to arrange marriages with Barisali Christians because many of the latter are from a low caste Hindu background, and this shows up in their behavior.
4. education
5. age — a husband should be older than his wife; a difference of three to five years is considered desirable



now. The average age for marriage for a girl now is around 16, lower for uneducated people and higher for well-educated people. Boys are usually married at anywhere from 23 on. Many educated boys want to wait until they have finished their education and are established in a job before they marry, so some don't marry until they are in their 30's.

6. appearance of girl — features, height (the wife should be shorter), bodily structure, color (the lighter the better — light is beautiful!)
7. financial condition of the families — the husband must be able to support his wife, and it is desirable for him to be heir to some land. If the wife's family is poor, they may constantly be asking the son-in-law for help. On the other hand, there is a developing tendency, at least among middle class Christians, for boys to want girls from poor families because they are not as demanding as girls from more affluent homes.

Among Christians and Hindus, marriage between blood relatives is not acceptable, but among Muslims and Buddhists there are many marriages of first cousins.

When a girl is married she becomes a part of her husband's family, and although she goes occasionally to visit in her father's home, she feels that her place now is in her husband's home. The relationship between her children and her father's family is not considered as significant as the relationship between her children and others in her father-in-law's family, as indicated by the saying, "Your mother's line is not your line" (মায়ের বংশ বংশই নয়)

A person is obligated to extend help to those on his father's side of the family but not his mother's. This also is expressed in the saying:

"My father's sister is my paternal aunt  
(বাপের বোন পিসি)

I provide for her.

(ভাত-কাপড় দিয়ে পুখি)

My mother's sister is my maternal aunt  
(মায়ের বোন মাসী)

I have no responsibility for her."

(কাদার তলে ঠাসি)

(literally — I stomp her under the mud).

Since the bride becomes part of her

husband's family, the groom's family is as important as the groom himself, and perhaps more so sometimes, to the bride's parents. The girl's parents are especially concerned that there is a substantial family to look after the couple and advise them. And the groom's family must be the kind of family the girl's parents would want to put their daughter into. Where the joint family system is still in vogue, the bride moves into her husband's home. Sometimes the couple has a separate house next to the family home, but in many cases, especially in lower class homes, they have only a separate small room in the main house. Even where the joint family has broken up, the newly married couple usually live with the husband's parents for a time — six months to two years. The mother-in-law trains her daughter-in-law to be a good wife and please her husband. In lower class homes, especially when the bride is very young, this often amounts to child raising, and it is common for the mother-in-law and/or husband to beat the young bride or punish her in other ways. In America we joke about a person marrying not only his wife but also her mother. In Bangladesh this is no joke; it could almost be said that a girl marries her mother-in-law. Her mother-in-law and father-in-law, as well as her husband, call her "my bride" (আমার বৌ)

It is considered a wife's duty to care for her mother-in-law and father-in-law in preference to her husband, just as her husband is to care for his parents in preference to his wife. This has serious implications in arranging marriages for male converts. Sometimes it seems that marriage with a good Christian girl would be just the right thing to stabilize a convert, but there are few Christian families who will allow their daughters to marry a convert. This is partly because of the fear that the boy might return to his former religion, and partly because they don't want their daughter to become part of a Muslim or Hindu family with all that this includes.

The procedure for arranging a marriage is as follows:

1. *conversation* (কথাবার্তা, কথা চলছে) — an approach is made by the boy's guardians to the girl's guardians, usually via a



go-between. If the approach comes from the girl's side it is done in a very indirect way through a third party so that it won't even be recognized as a proposal, just the planting of a suggestion. This initial approach begins negotiations which determine the suitability of the marriage. Sometimes the boy's mother makes a visit to the girl's home to observe the girl without making her intentions known. If she is satisfied, the boy's father then goes and makes a formal approach. If negotiations proceed well, the boy himself, along with some friends and relatives, may come to the girl's house. At that time the girl is called in to serve tea and to answer any questions which the boy or his friends ask. At this point she may or may not know that her marriage is being arranged. If the boy is satisfied, word is sent from the boy's family to the girl's family that they must give the new couple certain gifts such as a radio, a bicycle, etc.

2. *engagement* — if all considerations are satisfactory an engagement is finalized (কথাবার্তা পাকা করা, পানপাত্র) — between the two sets of guardians and the date may be set for the wedding. The wedding date is determined by the amount of time needed to make the wedding arrangements and by the horoscopes of the couple. A wedding must be performed on an auspicious day. The length of the engagement period varies, although often it is short to prevent hindrances from developing. Among Christians the couple are usually introduced to each other at the time of the engagement; among other religious groups they sometimes are introduced or photos exchanged. If they are introduced, it is in the presence of others.

3. *wedding* (বিবাহ, বিয়ে, সাদি) — This is one of the most important occasions for the bride's family, and is celebrated with as much pomp as they can afford. A feast is a must, and the bride's family will usually go into debt or sell property to be able to maintain what is expected of them in this respect. The wedding takes place in the bride's home (or in church if a Christian wedding). The groom's family gives clothing and jewelry for the bride and gifts of clothing to the girl's parents. The guests who attend the wedding feast

bring gifts for the couple. The groom's father and other relatives come to the bride's house for the wedding.

After the wedding, usually the next day, the bride and groom leave the bride's house and go to the groom's home. When they arrive there, both bride and groom pronam the groom's mother, who then takes the bride's arm and leads her into the house. Then the bride gives her parents-in-law gifts of clothing and the mother-in-law gives gold to the bride. Within the first few days after their arrival the custom of "bride's rice" (দৌ-ভাত) is observed. This involves a feast, according to the capacity of the groom's family to provide, and may include invitations to the whole church (if Christian), the whole village, etc. At this time the bride may stir the rice while it is cooking, or may serve one or two of the guests. Gifts for the couple are brought by the guests.

Marriages are generally more stable in Bangladesh than in the Western world. This can be attributed to several things:

— The general attitude toward marriage is that a marriage is expected to work. A woman's whole orientation is that she exists to be a wife and mother, and her self-esteem is related to successful fulfillment of her role.

— Apart from a few educated women who devote themselves to a profession of teaching or nursing, and a few others in the city who have outside jobs, women do not work outside the home. Thus a Bangladeshi woman's only hope for maintaining herself is as a wife, and once she has been given in marriage, her own family is not happy with the prospect of having to take her in again and support her and her children. It is not easy to arrange a second marriage for a woman, and a second marriage is usually less satisfactory than the first. Because the lot of a divorced woman is not a pleasant prospect, this serves as a deterrent to the kind of behavior which might result in divorce.

— Religious teaching regarding marriage: divorce is frowned upon by the religions of Bangladesh, except Islam.

— In the case of Muslims, part of the marriage arrangement includes the setting of the amount of money the hus-



band will pay the wife's family if he divorces her. This figure is usually fairly high so that it will be a deterrent to divorce.

Adultery is considered wrong among Bangladeshis and if it is discovered, the *para* (village) leaders will judge the matter and prescribe punishment for both the man and woman involved. The man is usually beaten by the other men in the village, but the woman gets greater censure and punishment. Sometimes her hus-

band is told he must take the children and put his wife out.

In Bangladesh among all religious groups, there are two acceptable ways of handling an illegitimate pregnancy: marriage before the birth of the baby, or abortion. There is great stigma on bearing an illegitimate child. Thus, if a girl is not able to do either of these two things, she may throw the baby away as soon as it is born or leave it on the convent steps. Abortion is quite common in Bangladesh among both married and unmarried women.



## CHAPTER 15

### FAMILY

The Bengali family consists of all relatives. Distant relatives are recognized and, until recently, any relationship represented a strong tie with certain obligations. This tie is weaker now because of the economic factor. Where formerly a person felt a responsibility to help any relative financially, now his circle of legitimate dependents has narrowed considerably.

A man's parents and his children are equally important to him, and he is obligated to provide for both. Formerly a home was considered incomplete if there were not grandparents in it, but this is less true now because of the breakdown of the joint family and increase in independent households. Usually at least one son lives with his parents.

Children are their parents' old-age security, so it is important that a couple have enough children, particularly sons, to provide that security. Daughters are not responsible to support their parents; their responsibility is all toward their husband's family. It has been said that to ensure a couple's having two sons who will grow to maturity, they must have eight children. It is a matter of great concern if a couple has no children or is able to have only a few.

When a woman becomes pregnant the family doesn't plan for the baby because so many babies die. The more plans they have made, the greater the sorrow if the baby should die. The couple may talk about the baby to each other, but usually no other reference is made to an unborn baby, as this might cause an ill effect. It is not considered wrong, though, to pray for the safe birth of a baby.

A wife regards her husband's brother's children as her own, and her children regard their father's brother's children as their own brothers and sisters. This is true even when the fathers have independent households, and is very strong in joint families. When the children all grow up together, they sometimes can hardly distinguish between their cousins and their own brothers and sisters. To the Bengali

mind, father and his younger brother are the same ( বাপ-কাকা একই ) .

In the Bengali culture an individual seldom makes his own decisions about anything. Everything is a family matter and decisions are made principally by the father, but often in consultation with his wife about children's matters, and with his older sons about other things. A man and his wife do not arrange a marriage for one of their children without the consent of the man's older brothers and their wives, and his parents, if they are living. In some cases a man has nothing to do with arranging the marriage of his children; his parents and older brothers handle the matter completely. A young person considers the wishes of his family when deciding on his vocation and college.

Even though family decisions are made by the father in consultation with other family members, his wife plays an important part in the joint family. In some cases it seems as if she "rules the roost," particularly with regard to her daughters-in-law. There is a definite "pecking order" extending from mother-in-law to oldest son's wife to each successive son's wife. A daughter-in-law is to a large extent subject to any older member of the family. Discipline of children may be administered by any member of the joint family, and younger couples are directed in the discipline of their children by older members of the family. A younger brother's wife does not have much to do with her husband's older brothers and carries on only necessary conversation with them.

It is customary for the men of a house to eat their meals before the women, although nowadays among more progressive Bangladeshis, husband and wife may eat together; and, if a husband knows that he will be late for a meal, he may tell his wife that he will be late and she may go ahead and eat before him. Without this permission a Bengali wife must never eat before her husband.

There are certain problems faced by



Christians in a joint family setup. The wife has to be subject to her in-laws, especially parents-in-law, as well as to her husband.

A husband and wife who are Muslim converts live in a joint family situation with three other brothers and their mother. The first year after their conversion, during the month of Ramzan, the husband didn't keep the fast but his wife had to because her mother-in-law insisted on it.

Also, the couple is not free to discipline their own children as they feel they should. A Muslim convert has a 17-year-old son whose mother died when he was a baby so he has been raised by his father's second wife. When this boy became involved in gambling and thievery, his father tried to discipline him but was unable to because the boy's grandmother and uncles accused him of being unjust to his son who had no mother to protect him.

Another young wife who lives among a group of her husband's brothers and sisters is constantly in conflict because her husband tells her to do one thing, his relatives tell her to do something different, and both parties are likely to beat her if she doesn't do what they say.

### *Child raising*

Respect for elders is an important Bengali value and is instilled in children from the beginning. This may be one of the reasons for the low incidence of juvenile delinquency as compared with Western countries. Child training consists chiefly of shaming the child ("Shame! When will you be a man?") (ছি! ছি! তুই কবে মানুষ হবি?) and of threatening him with caning, jackals, bogey men, and the like. Common methods of punishment are tie and beat; withhold food; lock alone in a room; stand in the corner; stand on one leg; stand up and squat down repeatedly while holding the ears. Sometimes brutal methods of punishment are used, such as tying a child to a tree and then throwing a handful of biting ants on him. Punishment does not seem to be applied consistently and is usually given in anger. The parent ignores the child for a long time and then suddenly strikes, often unreasonably.

Some parents ignore a child who is crying because he can't have his own way, but apart from this, most parents don't allow a child to cry. One Christian husband beat his wife if she let their baby cry.

Bangladeshis are great lovers of children and it is considered bad for a person not to love children and make a lot over them. It is not good to compliment a baby, or child, or anyone, for that matter, on his appearance or beauty if his relatives are present. They consider this a bad omen which may have an ill effect on the child, causing his illness. If a person does compliment a child for his beauty, his relatives will spit on the child to counteract the effect of the compliment. This applies chiefly to non-Christians and village Christians. It is all right to compliment a person for his virtues or behavior but not for his appearance. Actually, because of the common tendency in this country to flatter people in order to gain favor from them, direct praise to an equal or superior is considered bad taste, unless it is such a spontaneous expression that everyone recognizes it as sincere. It is all right to praise a person to a third party, but direct praise is looked upon as flattery and not considered genuine. People do praise a child or someone of a lower status directly in order to encourage him.

Most Bangladeshis do not discipline their children in terms of Western ideas of discipline and frequently depend on other people to teach their children how to behave. They are sometimes appalled by the way we Westerners discipline children. They may react sharply to a child's being slapped or spanked. This must not be a deterrent to you from correcting your own children. Nor does it mean that when Bangladeshi children come to your house they must be allowed to have their own way, ruining toys with which they are unfamiliar or handling your things in a rough way. Sweetly explain to the child and his parents whatever basic rules apply in your house.

Most Bengali babies do not wear diapers or rubber pants, so it isn't unusual to have a baby wet on you if you hold him. The best way to react to this is to ignore it. When you take the baby you may ask for a cloth to put underneath him.



## CHAPTER 16

### GREETINGS AND GESTURES

#### Greetings

1. The Muslim greeting is "Peace be with you" (আছলামু আলায়কুম), pronounced "ah-salam-alay-cum"; this greeting is returned by "With you be peace" (ওয়ালায়কুম-আছলাম), pronounced "walay-cumah-salam." The short form, "salam" (সলাম), is commonly used by both parties, however. "Adab" (আদাব) chiefly a Muslim greeting, commonly used by Muslims with non-Muslims. "Nomoshkar" (নমস্কার) is the greeting used with non-Muslims, spoken both at the time of meeting and of parting. Some Christians are encouraging the use of "Immanuel" as a greeting among Christians.
2. These greetings are not complete unless accompanied by the appropriate hand motion: one hand to the forehead for "salam" or "adab," two hands together to the forehead for "nomoshkar." If hands are occupied, nod your head and say the greeting. NEVER use the left hand alone for greetings. The hand motion for "Immanuel" is the right hand raised with palm out. Don't use your left hand for waving at people.
3. Always return whatever greeting is spoken to you. When greeting people whose religious background you do not know, wait until they greet you, then reply accordingly.
4. A person of higher standing does not greet one of lower standing, i.e., does not initiate a greeting. If such people (children, servants, etc.) greet you, however, you should return the greeting. You should initiate the greeting with a person who is older or of high status.
5. As a general rule these greetings are not used with close friends or with people with whom you have frequent contact. It is more common to ask "How are you?" in greeting these people.
6. It is customary in villages for women to greet each other by hugging with

head first on one side and then the other. This is done sometimes by men also.

#### Addressing people

In addressing a respectable man it is proper to use a polite term such as "babu" for a non-Muslim or "Sahib" or "meah" for a Muslim, e.g., a driver may be addressed as "driver sahib" but never just "driver."

When a person calls you, your response should be "bolo" (বল) to a person with whom you use common forms, or "bolun" (বলুন) to one with whom you use honorific. If the person who calls you is older than you, you may respond with whatever relationship term you use in addressing that person, e.g. "didi," "mashi," etc. This is spoken with rising intonation. The latter is the usual Bengali response.

Regarding the use of honorific, it is the Bengali custom that after two people have become friends and established a close relationship, the older person may say to the younger, "We've become friends now and you're younger than I; do you mind if I call you 'tumi' (তুমি)?"

Don't refer to a servant as "servant" or "chakor" (চাকর) in front of him. If you must refer to him, choose the highest possible status which he fills, e.g. a cook must always be referred to as "cook" or "baburchi" (বাবুচি); a general servant who does bearing and washing and/or cleaning should be referred to as "bearer." Servants do not expect to be treated as friends or equals and are embarrassed when so treated by a woman. It is all right occasionally to inquire about their families, etc., but joking and teasing are undesirable.

Some people have thought it necessary to speak loudly in order to get a Bangladeshi's attention, but using a loud voice indicates irritation and is considered a bit rude. The Bengali way to get a person's attention is to pronounce each word distinctly, and to repeat what you are saying.

Foreigners sometimes feel that they are



not able to tell when a Bangladeshi is angry. The signs of anger are a frown, red face and eyes, and talking in a loud tone of voice with agitation. Any of these signs alone does not necessarily indicate anger, but the three together do.

### Recognizing people

It is good to become familiar with ways in which you can identify what religious group a person belongs to just by looking at him.

#### 1. Dress

- Except for young girls up to 14 - 15 years of age, any woman wearing a shalwar/chemise is a Muslim.

#### 2. Names

##### Muslim surnames:

Jabbar	Hossain	Khaleque	Chowdhury	
Islam	Kalam	Uddin	Sharif	
Khan	Miah	Rahman	Ahmed	
Ali	Hoque	Huda	Latif	Malik

##### Muslim first names (male):

Mohammed	Rafique	Omar	Ishak	Iman
Abdul	Mostaque	Shahab	Abra	Imam
Abul	Anu	Gura	Sayed	Sultan
Nurul	Guna	Siddique		

##### Muslim first names (female):

Anwara	Ferdosi	Nurjahan		Titles:
Farida	Nilufar	Yasmin		Begum
Rashida	Fatima	Ayesha		Khatun
Ruksana	Amina	Sayedra		

##### Hindu surnames:

Chakraborty	Sen	Chowdhury	Dhar	Biswas
Chatterjee	Das	Pramanik	Gupta	Sinha
Banarjee	Sukladas	Nath	Mallik	Malakar
Bhattacharjee	Jaladar	Paul	Dey	Dewari

##### Hindu and Buddhist first names (male):

Shama	Santosh	Amullya	Gopal	Debendra
Rabindra	Parimal	Babul	Benu	Monindra
Shukhendru	Ananta	Dilip	Ramini	Brajendra
Badal	Suresh	Shudir	Mintu	Bimal

##### Hindu and Buddhist first names (female):

Anjali	Protima	Latika	Pushpo	Mamata
Bokul	Usha	Shephali	Santi	Mina
Shabitri	Lalita	Renu	Subra	Bhanu
Gita	Basanti	Kiran	Suchitra	Pramila

##### Buddhist surname: Barua

Christians' first names are either Bible names, names of saints, or Western names, or Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim names depending on

- A man wearing a dhuti is a non-Muslim.
- A man with a beard and/or wearing a prayer cap is a Muslim.
- Usually a woman with the spot of vermillion on her forehead is a Hindu or Buddhist. Those with the red line in the part of the hair are non-Muslims.
- In Chittagong District it is often true that Hindu men wear solid-colored lungis while Muslim men wear checkered lungis. Remember that this is not always true, however.
- A man with red hair and beard is a Muslim who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.



the person's background. Surnames are Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim.

### Gestures

Become familiar with the gestures used by Bangladeshis:

1. Downward motion of the hand from the wrist joint to beckon people to come. (This is similar to our motion of waving at someone. If you wave at a Bangladeshi, he will probably think you are calling him.)
2. Bangladeshis frequently point with the chin rather than the hand. When using the hand to indicate direction, they extend the hand straight ahead as if they were pointing but keep all fingers out together. It is not polite to point out a person with your finger, or to shake your finger at another person.
3. Bangladeshis frequently *indicate* "yes" by a sideways twist of the head. Since this is similar to the way we shake our head to indicate "no" we often think they are saying "no." Some Bangladeshis *indicate* "no" by a sideways shaking of the head (different from our way of doing it), but many simply use a two-tone grunt which sounds to us like our way of saying "mm-hm."
4. When Bangladeshis count on their fingers, they do not use each finger to indicate one. Rather, they begin at the base of the little finger and move upward to the two joints and tip of the finger, pointing with the thumb of the same hand, to count 1-4. By continuing on with the other fingers in turn, they can count to 16 on the four fingers of their left hand.
5. জিভ কাটা — When something untoward happens, in the kind of situation in which an American would bite his lower lip, a Bangladeshi sticks out his tongue and clamps his teeth on it about one-half inch back from the tip. Along with this gesture, his eyes are usually wide open.



## CHAPTER 17

### THE BEGINNING

The position of this chapter would seem to indicate that the study has come to an end. Such is not the case. For as long as the foreigner lives in Bangladesh, his will be a continual learning experience. If he keeps his eyes and ears open he will constantly be exposed to new thought patterns and reasons for doing certain things. These insights ought to be shared with colleagues in order that all may benefit.

As part of the never-ending study of the Bengali customs and culture, conscientiously work at getting to know the people, especially the people who live in the villages, for the village is the heart of Bangladesh. Intersected by innumerable rivers, rivulets and ponds, the whole

countryside is dotted with villages — sixty thousand or more. Eighty per cent of the population have their homes in these villages. To have an intimate knowledge of the Bangladeshi people, one must know the villagers and be acquainted with their way of life, their customs, their problems, their happiness and their sorrows.

It is possible to acquire some of this knowledge vicariously through the literature of Bengal. Read her authors, watch her dances, learn her songs, witness her dramas: above all, love her poets. Do this, and Bengal will work her way into your heart. You will never escape from her charm.



## NATIONAL ANTHEM

My Bengal of gold, I love you  
Forever your skies, your air set my heart in tune  
as if it were a flute.  
In Spring, Oh mother mine, the fragrance from  
your mango-groves makes me wild with joy—  
Ah, what a thrill!  
In Autumn, Oh mother mine,  
in the full-blossomed paddy fields,  
I have seen spread all over—sweet smiles!  
Ah, what a beauty, what shades, what an affection  
and what a tenderness!  
What a quilt have you spread at the feet of  
banyan trees and along the banks of rivers!  
Oh mother mine, words from your lips are like  
Nectar to my ears!  
Ah, what a thrill!  
If sadness, Oh mother mine, casts a gloom on your face,  
my eyes are filled with tears!

আমার সোনার বাংলা, আমি তোমায় ভালোবাসি ।  
চিরদিন তোমার আকাশ, তোমার বাতাস, আমার প্রাণে বাজায় বাঁশি ॥  
ও মা, ফাগুনে তোর আমের বনের ছাণে পাগল করে,  
মরি হায়, হায়রে—  
ও মা, অজ্ঞানে তোর ভরা ক্ষেতে আমি কি দেখেছি মধুর হাসি ॥  
কী শোভা, কী ছায়া গো, কী স্নেহ, কী মায়া গো—  
কি আঁচল বিছায়েছ বটের মূলে নদীর কূলে কূলে ।  
মা তোর মুখের বাণী আমার কানে লাগে সুধার মতো,  
মরি হায়, হায়রে—  
মা তোর বদনখানি মলিন হলে, ও মা আমি নয়ন জলে ভাসি ॥

Original in Bengali by Rabindranath Tagore  
Translation by Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan











